

PRELUDE TO A REVOLUTION:  
AFRICAN-AMERICAN WORLD WAR II VETERANS,  
DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS, AND CIVIL RIGHTS  
1940-1955

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“A New, radical Negro spirit has been born in France, which leaves us older radicals far behind. Thousands of young black men have offered their lives for the Lilies of France and they return ready to offer them again for the Sun-flowers of Afro-America.”

-W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Crisis*, June 1919

## **ABSTRACT**

Sarah Barksdale: Prelude to a Revolution  
(Under the direction of Richard H. Kohn)

This dissertation examines and analyzes the experiences of African-American servicemen in World War II through the lens of double consciousness. I argue that the black experience in the U.S. military at home and overseas, as troops encountered different cultures and places, changed and raised consciousness for black troops. In turn, this altered consciousness contributed to racial progress and new attitudes on the homefront upon their return. In the postwar period, veterans employed increasingly militant forms of protest, spearheaded a variety of desegregation efforts, and improved organizational efforts in the black community. Using an interdisciplinary approach to this topic, I incorporate oral testimonies from black veterans, the theory of double consciousness, and elements of contemporary black literature to articulate the prevailing consciousness within the black community in general and veterans in particular. The study makes a critical connection between the Second World War and the civil rights movement.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## Introduction

And as I groped in darkness  
and felt the pain of millions,  
gradually, like day driving night across the continent,  
I saw dawn upon them like the sun a vision  
of a time when all men walk proudly through the earth  
and the bombs and missiles lie at the bottom of the ocean . . .

Then washed in the brightness of this vision,  
I saw how in its radiance would grow and be nourished and suddenly  
burst into terrible and splendid bloom  
the blood-red flower of revolution.

“Roses and Revolutions” (1948, excerpts)<sup>1</sup>

Dudley Randall

In 1943, African-American poet Dudley Randall entered the U.S. Army Air Forces. Although a draftee, Randall explained that in World War II, troops felt “we were fighting for something . . . we were fighting against fascism.” He trained in Greensboro, North Carolina before moving to the Pacific as part of a segregated signal corps headquarters detachment. His unit spent its time overseas in a heavy construction detail; the men dug up trees, built camps and officer’s quarters, and erected telephone lines for airfields. The experience endured in Randall’s memory, and he gathered a great deal of material for his poetry. “I remember going on a ship across the Pacific Ocean and seeing flying fish,” wrote Randall. “I remember seeing the islands

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<sup>1</sup> Dudley Randall, *Roses and Revolutions: The Selected Writings of Dudley Randall*, ed. Melba Joyce Boyd (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2009), 33.

and seeing New Caledonia with houses pink and white and green against the hillside, and butterflies as big as brightly colored birds, flying over palm trees. And I marveled at the wonderful variety in nature.” Randall also vividly recalled the civilians in the Pacific, the French speaking New Caledonians. “I met the people who lived there and it opened my eyes to the wonder and the beauty and the variety of the world.”<sup>2</sup>

After the war, Randall returned to Detroit, Michigan. “When I returned to the United States, I was eager to go to college,” he revealed. Prior to the war, he and his family lacked the resources for higher education. The G.I. Bill provided that opportunity, and Randall described it as a “wonderful thing because it helped a whole class of people who would not have had the chance to get a college education.” He used the benefits to attend Wayne University and study English literature and Russian language. In college, Randall entered the Miles Poetry Workshop and established himself as a poet with his first publication in 1948, “Roses and Revolutions.” He graduated with a degree in English literature the following year, and went on to become a prolific civil rights poet and publisher during the Black Arts Movement.<sup>3</sup>

Randall’s wartime experiences shaped his life in some crucial respects. He gained a new understanding of people and places. The postwar benefits provided him with opportunities that might otherwise have remained out of reach. In “Roses and Revolutions,” Randall depicted a darkness that descended upon the earth and he portrayed the African-American plight. He detailed the dawning of a new consciousness, and predicted that this burgeoning vision of equality would someday produce a revolution. It is difficult to pinpoint when Randall ceased to grope in the darkness, as he put it. Perhaps when he witnessed the 1943 Detroit race riots, or

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<sup>2</sup> Melba Joyce Boyd, *Wrestling with the Muse: Dudley Randall and the Broadside Press* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 66; Randall, *Roses and Revolutions*, 4-7.

<sup>3</sup> Boyd, *Wrestling with the Muse*, 67.

during his time abroad, or when he returned home and beheld the attacks on black veterans in 1946. At some point, these wartime experiences produced a new consciousness, essential to his future in the struggle.<sup>4</sup>

More than a million African-American servicemen served in a segregated military during the Second World War. The experience changed and raised consciousness and produced new worldviews for many black troops and affected the civil rights struggles after the war. As African-American servicemen moved overseas and experienced combat, new cultures and places, and interacted with unfamiliar peoples, their horizons expanded. For troops that remained in the United States, the evident paradox of serving in a segregated military while waging a war for freedom, liberty, and democracy affected them in other respects. Despite the diversity of experiences, the shifting social landscapes that World War II created changed them. Some African-American servicemen returned to civilian life infuriated by the discrimination, debasement, and mistreatment of military life. Others returned with a new sense of the world; their time abroad altered their understandings of race relations and reeducated them about acceptable social interactions. These experiences left the veterans better prepared to carry on a struggle back home.

When African-American veterans reentered civilian society, they found that they often lacked access to certain citizenship benefits that should have been accorded to them as veterans. In response, black veterans fought to establish themselves as legitimate veterans and obtain those benefits which should have been automatic. They performed (conscious and unconscious) public

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<sup>4</sup> Randall's activism represents a different region and mode of activism than many of those discussed herein. A Northerner, he became active in the Black Arts Movement and worked to articulate an emergent type of black nationalism and the form of the burgeoning civil rights movement. Veterans like Randall, John O. Killens, Harold Cruse, and Hoyt William Fuller played important roles later in the Black Arts Movement. While that future, 1960s activism is not addressed in this dissertation, it is important to be aware of their formative periods, and recognize that geographically speaking, the activism took a number of different forms (from militant to intellectual) and during different periods. Each played an important role in the movement.

displays of black masculinity with military dress, often provoking violence or other backlash from the white community. Yet they refused to bend to white intimidation in the postwar period, and they brought forceful and more militant forms of protest to bear. The obstacles seemed insurmountable, and at times the steps backward outnumbered the steps forward. But black veterans made important progress toward obtaining greater civil liberties for the black community in the postwar period. In their fights to obtain G.I. Bill benefits, they spearheaded numerous initiatives to desegregate universities across the country. Their access to education and other benefits, though limited compared to white veterans, still outweighed that of non-veterans. It provided many with entry into an emerging black middle class. Their new positions heightened their abilities to organize and lead others. As they increased their activism in civil rights organizations, black veterans possessed the ability to forge new networks in areas previously out of reach or of marginal interest to national civil rights organizations. The wartime experiences had changed them, and they employed their new consciousness in productive channels as they arrived home.

Historians have likewise cited World War II as a pivotal moment in African-American history. Some have asserted that the war brought new, more militant attitudes to the black community, or initiated important social, political, and economic shifts.<sup>5</sup> Others have contended

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<sup>5</sup> There is a significant body of literature on African Americans on the home front during World War II that chronicles some of the social shifts. These histories cover a range of subjects. Bernard Sternsher, *The Negro in Depression and War: Prelude to Revolution, 1930-1945* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1969) compiled essays about important changes throughout society from religion to politics. Lewis A. Erenberg and Susan E. Hirsch's *The War in American Culture: Society and Consciousness During World War II* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996) also assembled essays about this assortment of changes, from family structure to popular music. Labor histories including Beth Tompkins Bates, *Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics in Black America, 1925-1945* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), Charles D. Chamberlain, *Victory at Home: Manpower and Race in the American South During World War II* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2003) focus on black workers and migrations during World War II, examining some of the large-scale demographic shifts.

that the war produced wider racial disparities.<sup>6</sup> Veterans are conspicuously absent from many of these historical narratives.<sup>7</sup> Even stories such as the desegregation of the military have generally been told from the outside, as the work of black and white reformers or administrators. The history of African Americans in wartime and African Americans in the postwar period is not sufficiently connected. This is a critical correlation, because the African-American military experience forms a basis for some of the postwar political, social, military, and economic shifts that followed. Other groups are employed wartime rhetoric to push for greater citizenship based on African-American participation in the war, and black veterans shaped the struggle in a variety of respects.

The veterans' presence must be considered as part of the narrative of civil rights in the 1940s and early 1950s.<sup>8</sup> Their impact on the Civil Rights Movement is of such consequence that

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<sup>6</sup> Historians such as Daniel Kryder, *Divided Arsenal: Race and the American State During World War II* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2000) argue that the Second World War actually led to some setbacks for the black community, and described the ways that something like restrictive wartime legislation counteracted potential minority gains. These historians point out important limitations in the wartime gains for minorities. Indeed, as Thomas Sugrue argued in *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996) some of those wartime shifts could create additional problems such as new levels of urban poverty, which led to larger economic inequalities over time. Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth Century America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), detailed legislation like the G.I. Bill and the ways this legislation widened the achievement/economic gaps between races. It is important to keep in mind that these shifts sometimes initiated new problems, and these historians point out the limitations of some wartime and postwar gains. William L. O'Neill, *A Democracy at War: America's fight at home and abroad in World War II* (New York: Free Press, 1993) includes a chapter on the failure of democracy for women and minorities during the war.

<sup>7</sup> Many historians have addressed rising protests throughout the war as well, but the servicemen remain largely unconnected with these narratives. John Morton Blum's *V was for Victory: Politics and American Culture during World War II* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976) looked at increasing race riots throughout the war. Others similarly documented the zoot suit riots or housing riots during and after the war. Eduardo Obregón Pagán, *Murder at the Sleepy Lagoon: Zoot Suits, Race, and Riot in Wartime L.A.* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Luis Alvarez, *The Power of Zoot: Youth Culture and Resistance During World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008). Only a few books like Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) incorporated some veterans and their military experiences into the history. Oftentimes historians will mention the veterans as important, and biographies cover the military service, but the connection between the wartime experiences and their civil rights actions is still relatively unexplored.

<sup>8</sup> The historiography of the civil rights movement is huge and constantly expanding. It encompasses a variety of types of history, from labor history to biography. In terms of the 1940s civil rights struggle, historian Harvard

it warrants closer examination. Not only does this study sharpen our understanding of the origins of the movement, but it examines the potential, limitations, and successes of these early initiatives. In addition, the veterans and their military service hugely impacted the black community. Their importance in the black press, black literature and poetry, music, and other cultural forms is evident. If these veterans were mobilizing the black community during this period, the history needs to better depict why and how, and the long-term impact of their activism.

The dissertation takes an interdisciplinary approach to measure the prevailing perceptions in the black community, particularly in black veterans. It is difficult to say conclusively that at one particular moment, these wartime experiences changed these servicemen. Yet employing certain theoretical tools can help to evaluate these psychological and ideological questions. Consciousness is one measure of the changes the veterans underwent during the war and method of assessing their actions and the larger impact of those actions. The concept of “double consciousness” provides a particularly appropriate framework for analysis within the context of World War II. Sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois described double consciousness as the dilemma of reconciling black identity with American identity. He explained that the American world did not permit African Americans to obtain true self-consciousness; black Americans only understood themselves through “the revelation of the other world . . . always looking at one’s self through

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Sitkoff was one of the earliest to address this period as essential to the later movement. Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). Sitkoff also contributed a chapter on the topic to Neil R. McMillen, ed. *Remaking Dixie: The Impact of World War II on the American South* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1997). Organizational histories have also constituted a key portion of civil rights literature, though most of these histories detail a later period and groups like SNCC or SCLC. Histories on the NAACP are limited, and have only recently begun proliferating. For many years, the organization was perceived as bureaucratic, elitist, and middle class. Kevern Verney, *The Debate on Black Civil Rights in America* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006); Yvonne Ryan, *Roy Wilkins: The Quiet Revolutionary and the NAACP* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky 2014); Lee Sartain, *Borders of Equality: the NAACP and the Baltimore Civil Rights Struggle, 1914-1970* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2013); Thomas L. Bynum, *NAACP Youth and the Fight for Black Freedom, 1936-1965* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 2013). Again, the connection with veterans’ organizational presence is limited.

the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity." A "two-ness" hovered on the periphery of black awareness: an American and a Negro, "two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body." African Americans constantly strove to merge these two selves, make it possible to be "both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face."<sup>9</sup>

In 1897 when DuBois first advanced this theory of double consciousness, a number of scholars influenced his understanding of the concept, particularly certain nineteenth-century German theorists. Key among these theorists, philosopher Georg Hegel wrote in 1837 that "the History of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of freedom."<sup>10</sup> Hegel framed consciousness as self-realization and oppositional identity. German philosopher Immanuel Kant explained that consciousness determined being. Karl Marx also posited that social surroundings and material conditions shaped consciousness. For philosophers such as Hegel or Kant, freedom consisted of heightened self-consciousness and autonomy. The progress of societies lay in finding that consciousness. Years later, Du Bois took these ideas about progress, freedom, and self-consciousness, and adapted them to the particular situation of African Americans. He drew from those German idealists, but also from American transcendentalism and emerging psychological studies. Within the transcendentalist movement, the term double consciousness appeared as early as 1843 in an essay by Ralph Waldo Emerson.

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<sup>9</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, in *Du Bois: Writings* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1986), 364-365.

<sup>10</sup> Georg Wilhelm Fredrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (NY: Willey Book Co., 1900), 19.

Emerson described the notion as a set of oppositions, the “downward pull of life in society . . . and the upward pull of communion with the divine.”<sup>11</sup>

Du Bois applied the concept to a marginalized group of people and suggested that this split identity combined with a history of strife to produce a deep psychological scarring of the African-American community. The hypothesis simultaneously critiqued American society. As Hegel and the other German idealists emphasized, the ultimate goal of self-consciousness was to attain freedom. The process of world history should continually move in that direction.<sup>12</sup> States achieved this freedom through the autonomy of their people. The will of the people created legitimate political authority, and citizens should only be bound by laws that were of their own making.<sup>13</sup> In the United States, that political legitimacy did not exist; the state denied entire segments of its population autonomy, freedom, and access to American identity. At the same time, Du Bois echoed Marxist theory and argued that environment had the ability to change consciousness. Things like education, exposure to culture, knowledge, or even trauma could alter awareness and perception.<sup>14</sup> He pointed out that at times African Americans did not demand better living conditions because “Negroes, used to such accommodations, do not as a

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<sup>11</sup> Dickinson D. Bruce, Jr. “W.E.B. Du Bois and the Idea of Double Consciousness” in *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr and Terri Hume Oliver (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 237-239. Bruce also suggested that both Emerson and Du Bois drew from Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe’s *Faust*. Du Bois’ image of the “two souls warring in one dark body,” parallel Faust’s cry, “Two souls, alas! Reside within my breast,/And each withdraws from, and repels, its brother.”

<sup>12</sup> Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, 19.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Johnson, "Kant's Moral Philosophy," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2009 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), forthcoming URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2009/entries/kant-moral/>>. Describing autonomy and freedom.

<sup>14</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (New York: BiblioBazaar, 2006), 184-196. Originally published in 1920, *Darkwater* includes a post apocalyptic story, “The Comet,” of the cooperation between a black man and a white woman.

rule demand better; they do not know what better houses mean.” They needed exposure to other modes of living.<sup>15</sup>

For African-American servicemen fighting a war for democracy while simultaneously denied first-class citizenship at home, the separation between facets of one’s identity became particularly powerful. The dissertation employs the concept of double consciousness to analyze their experiences in World War II and their impact on the postwar period. Black troops’ wartime experiences led many to question their own awareness, identities, and understanding of America. The war changed and raised consciousness. Double consciousness helps to dissect questions of identity for this group of men. The concept critically addresses the question of their state of mind throughout the war and what potential transformations they experienced. Before integration could take place or a revolution could commence, the black community had to undergo a transformation and acquire new forms of consciousness to bring the fight effectively back to the homefront. The wartime transformations of black troops constituted an important element of that shift in black society.

The dissertation also uses contemporary black writers to articulate and assess the prevailing state of consciousness within the black community and in black veterans more specifically. These writers function as “consciousness experts,” and in their work they continually examined black thinking, contemporary events, ideology, and psychology. Their analysis stretched through the war and into the postwar period, and their fiction and poetry accessed certain truths about individuals and society. Wartime themes permeated their work, and oftentimes the writers directly addressed the tribulations of African Americans in the military. They posed the question on much of the black community’s minds: What happened after the war ended and the black veterans returned home? Trained to perform as warriors and

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<sup>15</sup> Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* in *W.E.B. Du Bois: Writings*, 459.

dispatched to the far reaches of the world in the name of democracy, would they receive the treatment that their service merited as they came back?

In 1946, poet Owen Dodson reminded the servicemen in his poem, “The Decision,” that as the fighting concluded overseas, their work was far from over: “There are other journeys/You must make after your journey home,/Other journeys you must make alone/Into the countries of the heart.”<sup>16</sup> Dodson pointed out that the men would have to bring that struggle home. After fighting for freedom and democracy abroad, they would be subjected to racism in the U.S. Not only did they have to overcome the traumas overseas, they must continue waging the fight for equality on the homefront. Dodson mourned the tragedies of war, yet he still expressed hope. He suggested that the end of the war brought new possibilities for America and the world and argued, like Du Bois, that trauma could initiate new beginnings; “torn souls and broken bodies” would be restored and the “doors to hope swung open.” The ordeal the world had just experienced could provide a fresh start.<sup>17</sup>

These writers predicted the fight that would ensue once these troops returned. They continued addressing black consciousness and invisibility in the postwar period. Their analysis forms a portion of each chapter, illustrating the ways they examined and revealed critical positions within the black community. Certain subjects, such as citizenship and identity, repeatedly surfaced in their work. They produced art as a political declaration during a moment of transformation. Literary analysis interrogates the war’s influence on black consciousness during this period.

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<sup>16</sup> Owen Dodson, *Powerful Long Ladder* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Company, Inc., 1946), 96.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, “Open Letter,” 103.

The dissertation investigates the period from 1940 to 1954, beginning with the Selective Service and Training Act (the first peacetime draft, which included African Americans) and moving to the beginning stages of the postwar civil rights movement. The first half of the dissertation considers African-American servicemen's wartime experiences, to 1945. Their story starts with African-American efforts to be included in the U.S. mobilization. As some officials endeavored to keep African Americans out of the military, the black community continued pushing for inclusion as draft boards repeatedly rejected African Americans. Why did black citizens persist in advocating for participation, and what did they stand to gain from that military service? How did it place different facets of their identity as Americans into conflict? Once they entered the military, African-American troops trained on bases and camps within the United States, often experiencing discrimination. The dissertation analyzes the unique aspects of the black military experience on the homefront, and the ways black troops interacted with military officials and white civilians.

Eventually, African-American troops began deploying overseas, largely in service units, but some in combat units as well. The next segment investigates the overseas experiences, looking at the types of duty black troops performed and a variety of military and social interactions. Their relationships with white American servicemen highlighted the disparities between black identity and American identity. Likewise, the relationships with foreign civilians abroad had the potential to transform black servicemen's worldviews. The overseas segment is divided between Europe and the Pacific. Black servicemen had different types of encounters with places and civilians in the two theaters, and the events altered their perceptions in a variety of ways. They interacted with civilians socially and romantically and sexually, and it affected their perceptions of normative race relations at home. In this first half of the dissertation, the

overall question of what changed and radicalized some black servicemen is the key element of the investigation. Did they have distinctive individual experiences that changed them or revealed new possibilities?

The second half of the dissertation addresses the veterans' experiences in the postwar period. When black servicemen arrived home and mustered out, like white servicemen they faced readjustment to civilian life. Veterans had a variety of resources available to help, especially the G.I. Bill. Yet these resources were much less available to African-American veterans. This segment presents an overview of the environment to which the veterans returned, juxtaposing it with their military service and expectations for reentry into civilian life. How did the black community overall and black veterans specifically react to hostility in the postwar environment, and did it galvanize them into action? In turn, did that action translate into broader political and institutional changes within the United States? The last two chapters of the dissertation explain how black veterans reacted to their experiences in World War II and the shock of returning to a civilian population in many areas unreceptive to their sacrifices. Black veterans employed that anger and new consciousness as activists in the postwar period in a variety of ways. How did they combat racism and hostility on an individual level, and what implications did that have for normative understandings of race relations? Were they able to organize and effectively fight the oppressive systems in place during the late 1940s and early 1950s? I explore the types of activism they applied and the effect of that activism on the impending civil rights movement.

Not every serviceman experienced in the war in the same way, and not everyone came home and joined the struggle. Those who did come home and fight for rights joined the struggle in different ways, and the nature of that struggle manifested differently in diverse regions across

the country. The study is limited to certain geographical regions and locations with particular attention to certain events in Mississippi, Chicago, and Washington, D.C. They do not represent every veteran's experience. Yet it is important to note that some two thirds of black veterans returned home to the South. These areas generated more source material, more volatile struggles, and were often more in need of organizational assistance. The nature of these struggles provides more evidence for historians to use in understanding the impact of black service on the civil rights movement. By emphasizing southern areas, I merely intend to highlight the regions where some of the veterans' activism was most prominent and influential. This is not to say that it was less so in other places. As the example of Detroit native Dudley Randall underscored, the veterans participated in a variety of respects and in dissimilar regions where different sorts of activism were more appropriate, possible, and productive. On the ground in Mississippi, this type of artistic action would have much less currency. Essentially, this is one of the important facets of black veteran activism: as insiders with the intimate knowledge of that place, they could decide and implement the most effective type of protest in that setting.

In order to understand this idea of consciousness, black veterans' voices figure prominently into the dissertation. As oral history is often the primary available source for understanding and learning about combat experience, it is also an important source for measuring how those experiencing trauma comprehended these experiences.<sup>18</sup> To gauge consciousness and glimpse personal psychology, the dissertation uses interviews, letters, memoirs, and diaries for the servicemen's voices. Personal paper collections for veterans like William Robert Ming and Wiley A. Branton not only show how these men described their wartime experiences in later

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<sup>18</sup> Peter Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers: Ground Combat in the World Wars, Korea, and Vietnam* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2003), xvii.

years, but also give an overview of their lives and careers in the postwar period. These collections provide an idea of the forms of protest they exercised when they returned home. Organizational records from groups like the NAACP, the American Veterans Committee, the Southern Regional Council, and the National Urban League also illustrate the sorts of activities in which veterans engaged in the postwar period. Correspondence and reports from these organizations demonstrate the roles the veterans played within these groups and their strengths and limitations in this type of activism. To examine individual racial confrontations and personal ways that black veterans fought racism and discrimination in the postwar period, the black press provided an invaluable source. In the future, I would like to build upon these accounts and examine judicial records from some of the locales in Mississippi. In this project, however, the press capitalized on that cultural currency that military service should have provided and acted as the most consistent source that publicized the veterans' activism and postwar violence and struggle.

The topic and question remains relevant in today's world. For many years, the contributions of black servicemen were overlooked by the public, political leaders, and historians alike. No African Americans received the Medal of Honor in World War II. At the request of the Army itself, historians reexamined this exclusion in 1993, and in 1997 President Clinton awarded seven African Americans the Medal of Honor.<sup>19</sup> The veterans I interviewed for this project participated willingly, eager to explain their contributions. The years of neglect and omission necessitate a greater examination of their involvement, not just during the war but into the postwar period as black veterans and civilians alike forged a new order. In addition, the questions about military service and citizenship persists in our society. With constantly shifting

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<sup>19</sup> Elliott V. Converse III, Daniel Gibran, John A. Cash, Robert K. Griffith, and Richard H. Kohn, *The Exclusion of Black Soldiers from the Medal of Honor in World War II* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 1997).

demographics, it is important to understand the effect of military service upon citizenship and rights in a variety of contexts, particularly for minority groups. A thorough understanding of that historical moment necessitates an examination of certain critical actors. Veterans, their concerns, and advocacy permeated American society in the years after World War II. Indeed, the idea of the World War II veteran still plays a prominent role in the American imagination and understanding of that war: the Greatest Generation. We continue to complicate the understanding of this group and moment. Black veterans and their import in this period are only dimly understood. The Second World War was a pivotal historical event; it shifted social landscapes across the world, and it continues to shape our world today. We must understand how it did that, and what elements affect our experience, memory, and understanding into the future.

Chapter 1  
The Dilemma: African American Troops on the Homefront

Dear Mr. President:

This letter, in behalf of thirteen million American citizens, is written to you as Commander-in-Chief of the American Army and Navy. It is proposed herein to bring clearly and explicitly to your attention, once again, the soul-crushing discrimination practiced against black Americans in all branches of the military and naval services.

Respectfully yours,  
Ira F. Lewis, Publisher  
*The Pittsburgh Courier*<sup>1</sup>

In August 1941, later editor of the *Pittsburgh Courier* and architect of the Double-V Campaign, Ira Lewis penned a letter to President Roosevelt in the wake of a violent racial incident at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. The particular episode resulted in the deaths of two black American soldiers. In spite of events, Lewis wrote to reaffirm the African American commitment to the country. Indeed, wrote Lewis, African Americans stood as “willing to die for it today as they have been in the past.” Yet as he pointed out to the president, recent events demonstrated that African Americans could die fighting a common foe abroad, or defending themselves against those who denied them basic liberties within their own country. African Americans were frustrated, maligned, and debased, wrote Lewis, and “they do not intend to be on the run forever. Some day they may stand and fight.” Not only did Lewis detail the ways that African Americans were struggling to be incorporated as the country mobilized for war, but he

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<sup>1</sup> Letter Ira Lewis to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, 19 Aug 1941, folder 9-1-41, box 1080, Entry 363-A; Army A-G Decimal File 1940-1945, 291.2 (Race); Records of the Adjutant General’s Office, Record Group (RG) 407; National Archives at College Park, MD (hereafter cited as NACP).

foreshadowed the civil rights struggles on the horizon. The intense discrimination these men faced contradicted the principles the United States enunciated. As black Americans entered the military to defend these principles, they found themselves oppressed, exploited, and at times brutalized.

This chapter begins with the United States' mobilization prior to Pearl Harbor, including the passage of the Selective Service and Training Act to emphasize utilization (or lack thereof) of black troops. I examine the struggles of African Americans attempting to enter the military and the discrimination they experienced upon induction. In 1943, most African American troops trained within the United States, waiting to deploy overseas. Racial clashes intensified and riots increased on the homefront as black troops became increasingly frustrated with the military's misapplication of their skills and training. Some designated combat units never deployed. The chapter traces the development of tensions among black troops on the homefront throughout the war.

Every step of the way, black troops faced roadblocks. White servicemen and civilians heaped hatred and racism upon them, leading many black servicemen to contemplate their own identities as soldiers, Americans, and black citizens. With African Americans' initial push for inclusion as the country mobilized for war, they sought access to an identity as Americans, entitling them to the same rights as other citizens. As the war progressed, and African Americans struggled with racism and abuse for their service, while simultaneously facing the misappropriation of their talents and manpower, their patience wore thin. Again and again, black troops stateside rebelled against the daily indignities of both social and military segregation. Placed in a position as servicemen that should have afforded them certain rights, black troops in the United States grew increasingly frustrated, and tensions increased throughout the war

culminating in a number of violent clashes. These riots and rebellions as black troops lashed out to demand equal treatment in the military illustrated some of the many shifts throughout the wartime period leading to a changing landscape and new attitudes for black veterans in the postwar period. The massive scale of mobilization in the Second World War provided a context in which African Americans could demand equal rights.

Yet World War II did not represent the first push to use military service in a play for equal rights. African Americans served in every major war in United States history. As poet Melvin B. Tolson expressed in his 1944 poem, “The Unknown Soldier,” “These shrines of freedom are mine as well as yours; These ashes of freemen yours as well as mine.”<sup>2</sup> As Tolson wrote, “I was a minuteman at Concord Hill.” In reality, African-American participation in United States military campaigns dated much farther back. As early as 1715, African-Americans participated in the Yamasee Wars in South Carolina, and subsequent frontier wars. In the 1715 campaigns South Carolinians pressed several inhabitants and slaves into involuntary military service to augment colonial forces. One South Carolina unit in the summer of that year consisted of 100 white men and 100 African-American men. At the same time, African-American slaves also cooperated or bargained with Yamasee raiding parties, entering alliances with Native Americans against the colonists. Even at this early date, South Carolinians harbored fears about enlisting their black slaves, concerned about insurrections.<sup>3</sup>

During the American Revolution, several African Americans joined American forces against the British at Lexington and Concord.<sup>4</sup> They served until 1775 with various New

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<sup>2</sup> Melvin B. Tolson, *Rendezvous with America* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1944), 34.

<sup>3</sup> William L. Ramsey, *The Yamasee War: A Study of Culture, Economy, and Conflict in the Colonial South* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 163-164.

<sup>4</sup> Bernard C. Nalty, *Strength for the Fight: A History of Black Americans in the Military* (New York: The Free Press, 1986), 10.

England units, though eventually troops from southern colonies began objecting to their presence. Shortly after George Washington, Virginian and slaveholder, assumed command of the Continental Army, the Continental Congress acquiesced to their wishes and banned African Americans from the Continental Army. Washington's favorite slave, William Lee, known as his "black shadow," fought at his side the entire war.<sup>5</sup> On the British side, the Royal Governor of Virginia, Lord Dunmore, took advantage of the available manpower and offered indentured servants and African Americans amnesty for taking up arms for the British. He hoped to cripple the plantations dependent on a slave economy. Alarmed by this development, the Continental Congress acted and allowed black veterans to reenlist, though maintaining the ban on new recruits; the Americans used the veterans for labor and construction. The Revolution provided some upward mobility for slaves and free blacks, particularly in the Continental Navy which had no ban on black service. Overall, the conflict set two precedents into motion for African-American troops. First, it established the belief for many that military service in times of war provided access to freedom and opportunity, a path to citizenship.<sup>6</sup> Second, it began a pattern of using African-American manpower in times of crisis but subsequently ignoring them.<sup>7</sup> In 1792, the Militia Act provided only for the enrollment of white male citizens.

In 1812, the mere sight of British warships off the coast led to escape attempts by slaves who remembered Lord Dunmore. The British commander in the Chesapeake reestablished a processing center for ex-slaves. On the American side, the New York legislature authorized two

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<sup>5</sup> Gail Buckley, *American Patriots: The Story of Blacks in the Military from the Revolution to Desert Storm* (New York: Random House, 2001), 14.

<sup>6</sup> Nalty, *Strength for the Fight*, 11-14.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Binkin, Mark J. Eitelberg, Alvin J. Schexnider, and Marvin M. Smith, *Blacks in the Military* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institute, 1982), 10.

black regiments, including slaves with their master's permission.<sup>8</sup> General Andrew Jackson called for free-black volunteers as he organized the defense of New Orleans, offering pay, rations, and bounty equal to white volunteers. "As Americans," proclaimed Jackson, "your country looks with confidence to her adopted children, for a valorous support, as a faithful return for the advantages enjoyed under her mild and equitable government."<sup>9</sup> He proposed, however, to place them in separate units to decrease friction and create a unit identity. The subsequent black units helped to check the preliminary British advances toward New Orleans and played an important role in the battle. While Jackson recognized their accomplishments, Congress revised the laws in 1834 and put black militia units out of commission.<sup>10</sup> Only the Navy continued to recruit African Americans in the post 1812 era.

With the advent of the American Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln initially excluded African Americans from the military in order to maintain border state loyalty. In March 1862, Congress outlawed the return of fugitive slaves, and Lincoln signed legislation banning slavery in Washington D.C. shortly afterward. That summer, General Benjamin Butler mustered the black Louisiana Native Guard, defenders of New Orleans, into his Army, calling them "contrabands of war."<sup>11</sup> African Americans continued serving in the Union Navy, and blockading squadrons had permission to enlist "contrabands" as well, giving them full rations though less pay. African Americans may have constituted as many as 30,000 of 120,000

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<sup>8</sup> Robert W. Mullen, *Blacks in America's Wars: The Shift in Attitudes from the Revolutionary War to Vietnam* (New York: Monad Press, 1973), 15.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-25.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 31-33; Buckley, *American Patriots*, 86-87.

wartime enlistees in the Union Navy.<sup>12</sup> Robert Smalls, an escaped slave, and a small band of followers, took a Confederate steamer and ran it out of the Charleston harbor. He presented it to the Union Navy, saying, “I thought the *Planter* might be of some use to Uncle Abe.”<sup>13</sup> Smalls went on to assist the Union Navy for the remainder of the war, using his knowledge of shipyards and Confederate defenses to provide detailed information. Former slaves also worked as foremen and coal heavers on river steamers, to reduce expenses for the Union Navy.<sup>14</sup>

Congress authorized the President to arm blacks in July 1862, and in 1863 the Emancipation Proclamation led to African-American recruitment throughout the country. Serving in the Union Army, despite the intense prejudice they faced, helped to create a black sense of the concept of citizenship and military service.<sup>15</sup> Black troops like the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts fought doggedly, though more often than not military authorities assigned them to peripheral tasks while using white units for combat.<sup>16</sup> The 55<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts mainly performed labor duties.<sup>17</sup> This was another trend that carried into future wars: giving black troops labor or supporting duties, as though placing them directly in combat or allowing them to sustain equal shares of casualties increased their claim to citizenship and rights.

In the aftermath of the Civil War, Republicans in Congress authorized six black regular units in the peacetime Army. In 1866 the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Cavalries and the 38<sup>th</sup>, 39<sup>th</sup>, 40<sup>th</sup>, and 41<sup>st</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Nalty, *Strength for the Fight*, 31-33.

<sup>13</sup> Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the Civil War* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1953), 71.

<sup>14</sup> Nalty, *Strength for the Fight*, 31-33.

<sup>15</sup> Christian G. Samito, *Becoming American under Fire: Irish Americans, African Americans, and the Politics of Citizenship During the Civil War Era* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 47.

<sup>16</sup> Joseph T. Glatthaar, *Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers* (New York: The Free Press, 1990), 160.

<sup>17</sup> Nalty, *Strength for the Fight*, 31-38.

Infantry Regiments formed. Segregated and commanded by white officers, African Americans constituted about one-fifth of the post-Civil War Army. Reorganized in 1869, military authorities consolidated the infantry into the 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiments. African Americans enlisted in large numbers; thirteen dollars a month seemed substantial, and work in the postwar South was scarce.<sup>18</sup> As in the Civil War, black troops endured discrimination and maltreatment from their own white leaders. In the 9<sup>th</sup> Cavalry, the first blood spilled was from its own. A number of black troops at San Pedro Springs, Texas killed a couple of officers for barbaric treatment; a white lieutenant had ordered that several of his men be hung by their wrists from trees when they failed to respond quickly enough to orders. Initially, the black presence in the West resulted in frequent violent outbreaks. As one historian noted, black troops would likely have agreed with General Philip Sheridan's assertion, "If I owned hell and Texas I would rent out Texas and live in hell."<sup>19</sup> Eventually, however, western commanders accepted black soldiers as reliable and commended their abilities to subdue some of the more incendiary American Indians. The plains Indians christened the group, "buffalo soldiers." White civilians also came to accept black soldiers as protection from Indians, though segregation remained law.<sup>20</sup>

During the Spanish American War, the black regulars supported Theodore Roosevelt's Rough Riders, and in the aftermath of the Battle of San Juan Hill Roosevelt proclaimed that the men of the Rough Riders would not soon forget the black cavalry's valor. Later, the politician contradicted this, depicting black soldiers as "peculiarly dependent upon their white officers,"

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<sup>18</sup> W. Sherman Savage, *Blacks in the West* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975), 49.

<sup>19</sup> Frank N. Schubert, *Voices of the Buffalo Soldier: Records, Reports, and Recollections of Military Life and Service in the West* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2003), 31.

<sup>20</sup> Nalty, *Strength for the Fight*, 50-60; Bruce A. Glasrud and Michael N. Searles, ed., *Buffalo Soldiers in the West: A Black Soldiers Anthology* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2007), 6.

with a tendency to “drift to the rear” in heavy action.<sup>21</sup> In later years, other commanders echoed this refrain, accusing black units of cowardice and fading away in combat, giving the military an excuse to relegate them to labor duties.

The pattern of segregation and discrimination in the military continued into the twentieth century. In the First World War the United States reinstated a draft, and called over 367,700 African-Americans to serve.<sup>22</sup> The Navy ceased recruiting African Americans for over a decade after World War I, and when it resumed in 1932, African Americans could only serve in the Messman Branch.<sup>23</sup> While African Americans made up almost thirteen percent of the draftees, they only served in two infantry divisions, the 92<sup>nd</sup> and the 93<sup>rd</sup>. Eight out of ten black servicemen labored in the Services of Supply during World War I.<sup>24</sup> For black labor battalions that remained in the United States, their units looked more like convict labor gangs than military units. The War Department selected white noncommissioned officers who knew how to “handle” African-Americans, and these noncommissioned officers did not hesitate to use violence to discipline the men and increase productivity.<sup>25</sup> In the Services of Supply overseas, the majority of black laborers worked as stevedores in French port cities. Many worked more than sixteen hours a day, lived in substandard quarters, and had few opportunities for recreation,

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<sup>21</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, “The Rough Riders,” *Scribner’s Magazine*, April 1899, 435-436.

<sup>22</sup> Bill Harris, *The Hellfighters of Harlem: African-American Soldiers who Fought for the Right to Fight for their Country* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2002), 22.

<sup>23</sup> Henry I. Shaw, Jr and Ralph W. Donnelly, *Blacks in the Marine Corps* (Washington, D.C.: History and Museums Division Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1975), x.

<sup>24</sup> Martin Binkin, et al., *Blacks in the Military*, 17-18.

<sup>25</sup> Chad L. Williams, *Torchbearers of Democracy: African American Soldiers in the World War I Era* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 108-110.

leading to greater influenza and fatality rates among the black laborers. In the port cities, racial tensions between black and white American soldiers often exploded into violence.<sup>26</sup>

The 93<sup>rd</sup> Provisional Division consisted of three National Guard regiments: the 369<sup>th</sup>, 370<sup>th</sup>, and 372<sup>nd</sup>. It was “provisional” because it lacked the normal components of a full division, having no artillery. Pershing ended up turning these three units over to the French Army, which placed them in a special corps called “Bataillons d’Afrique,” though the French army called them “Les Joyeux.”<sup>27</sup> In spite of the French attitudes welcoming the black soldiers, this was not an easy assignment. Although the black soldiers kept their American uniforms, they had to use French weapons and gear with which they had little familiarity. They adjusted to French rations, which consisted of a very different diet than the usual American fare, and the language barriers made communication difficult.<sup>28</sup> The French praised the African-American troops’ performance however, and as the 93<sup>rd</sup> French commander later observed, “they never lost a prisoner, trench or foot of ground during 191 days under fire, longer than any other American unit.”<sup>29</sup>

In spite of the performance and participation in the First World War, the race riots and other violence that ensued in the Red Summer of 1919 reversed many potential gains for African Americans. When black veterans returned to the United States, challenging the status quo in a more militant fashion, whites struck back and a wave of racial unrest swept the country. Riots in cities like Washington D.C. and Chicago lasted for weeks as black veterans and citizens battled

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 111-113.

<sup>27</sup> Harris, *The Hellfighters of Harlem*, 31-33.

<sup>28</sup> Nina Mjagkij, *Loyalty in Time of Trial: The African American Experience during World War I* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2011), 106.

<sup>29</sup> Binkin et al., *Blacks in the Military*, 17-18.

with white police forces. City leaders feared the black veterans returning, and worried about how to incorporate them into the city's workforce. In Chicago, when a young black man floated into the "white" swimming area in Lake Michigan, white beachgoers stoned him until he drowned. Violence and anger erupted and the riot raged for two weeks; white policemen spent much of their time to policing the black neighborhoods, abusing and arresting African Americans.<sup>30</sup> Yet the aftermath of the First World War also shaped the development of reformer's organizational strategies and activism. As the federal government failed to protect black veterans during the Red Summer, civil rights organizations pushed to assert political rights and federal protections for black citizens. By the time of the Second World War, black activists and veterans were prepared for the fight.<sup>31</sup>

In the post World War II period a similar backlash would occur. Yet a number of factors increased African American's ability to make progress this time. Throughout the war over a million African Americans served in various branches of the United States military. Not only did the scale of mobilization change in the Second World War, but the socio-political environment on the homefront underwent a number of shifts before and during the war. The Great Depression scarred the black community and led increasing numbers of African Americans to urban centers in search of work.<sup>32</sup> With greater concentrations in the cities, they found increasing leverage as a voting group. Long loyal to the party of Abraham Lincoln, many began broadening their political allegiances as early as the 1920s. In 1934 Illinoisans elected the first

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<sup>30</sup> Williams, *Torchbearers of Democracy*, 251-253; William M. Tuttle Jr., *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919*, 1996).

<sup>31</sup> Adriane Lentz-Smith, *Freedom Struggles: African Americans and World War I* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 205.

<sup>32</sup> John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003). 421.

African-American Democrat to office in the House of Representatives. While many African Americans expressed dissatisfaction with the exclusionary policies of the New Deal agencies and still mistrusted the Democratic Party, a shift in party loyalties was clearly beginning.

Politicians accordingly increased their attention to the black vote. President Roosevelt formed a “Black Cabinet” (an informal group of policy advisers) to advise him on affairs relating to African Americans. With the election of 1940, he made a few additions to his black cabinet to garner greater support from African American constituents.<sup>33</sup> In 1937, Roosevelt appointed William H. Hastie, a solicitor for the Department of the Interior, to be Judge of the Virgins Islands—the first African American federal judge. Two years later, Hastie resigned the post and became Dean of Howard University Law School. In October 1940, as mobilization accelerated, Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson selected Hastie as a Civilian Aide to the Secretary of War, where Hastie served until 1943 when he resigned to protest discriminatory War Department policies. In the month before the 1940 election, Roosevelt promoted Army Colonel Benjamin O. Davis, Sr. to brigadier, making Davis the first African American general officer. The President made Campbell C. Johnson, reserve commander for ROTC at Howard University, Special Aide to the Director of Selective Service. With these appointments, Roosevelt hoped not only to capture the black vote, but to maintain African-American support for the mobilization.

Indeed, as preparations for war increased, so did the number of African American advisers. Crystal Bird Fauset, former Pennsylvania legislator, became the racial relations adviser in the Office of Civilian Defense. Ted Poston, a New York newspaperman, worked in a similar capacity at the Office of War Information. Numerous others served with the War Production

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 429. While previous administrations used African American political advisers, Roosevelt’s created a much larger group with his black cabinet, providing them with easier access to the President and the members often held paid positions within the government as opposed to more informal appointments.

Board, the War Manpower Commission, the Office of Price Administration, and the Social Security Board.<sup>34</sup> In addition to these appointments, black reformers pushed to ensure that

African Americans had a place in other areas of the accelerating mobilization for war.

Roosevelt's black cabinet illustrated one of many ways that U.S. mobilization for war began to change the political situation for African Americans. To a degree, this policy of appointing African American specialists and advisers in official government positions lent additional respectability and credence to the black community.

For civilian workers as well the war brought greater opportunity and equality in federal employment. In 1940 the Ramspeck Act and Executive Order 8587 amended segments of the civil service rules, outlawing racial and religious discrimination in federal employment.

Reformer A. Philip Randolph, head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, initiated additional change with his 1941 March on Washington Movement. When he threatened a march of 10,000 African Americans on the National Mall, the President conceded to black demands to establish an anti-discrimination clause for the defense industry. With Executive Order 8802 and the formation of the Fair Employment Practices Council (FEPC), President Franklin D.

Roosevelt prohibited discrimination in the national defense industry. While the FEPC had little regulatory authority, and the Civil Service Commission did little to correct discrimination in the workplace, African Americans made some progress during this period. They remained concentrated in temporary war agencies with less permanent positions, and often occupied more menial roles. Yet their numbers in the federal government, particularly the defense industry, increased monumentally during World War II. Their large-scale migrations to Northern urban centers plus the numerical gains in the defense industry gave them additional leverage politically

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 431.

and for labor, allowing them to maintain some of these roles in the postwar period. There would be no repetition of the post-World War I period.<sup>35</sup>

As tensions rose in Europe, the United States continued to prepare for war. In September 1940 Congress passed the first peacetime conscription in United States history. The original act caused the registration of something like sixteen million men between the ages of twenty-one and thirty-six.<sup>36</sup> With later amendments to the Selective Service and Training Act the U.S. extended the age limits, supplying itself with a manpower pool rivaled only by the Soviet Union.<sup>37</sup> The draft included African American men as well, those who met the physical and mental qualifications for military service. Draft boards consisted of local volunteers, usually reflecting local prejudices and perspectives. Only three southern states (Virginia, North Carolina, and Kentucky) permitted African Americans to sit on the draft boards.<sup>38</sup> As a result, boards often contrived reasons to dismiss African Americans as unfit for service. The act initially affirmed that in a free society, the privileges of military service should be shared in a fair system of military participation—that all the citizens of the country must take part in its defense. It theoretically assured African Americans a place in the mobilization.<sup>39</sup> A number of African American reformers, however, found this wording a bit vague and pushed Congress for

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<sup>35</sup> Samuel Krislov, *The Negro in Federal Employment: The Quest for Equal Opportunity* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1967), 28-34.

<sup>36</sup> David Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 632.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 633.

<sup>39</sup> Barnard C. Nalty and Morris J. MacGregor, *Blacks in the Military: Essential Documents* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1981), 105. Analysis by Nalty and MacGregor.

additional and more explicit safeguards to ensure their inclusion.<sup>40</sup> The final amended version of the act affirmed that “within the limits of the quota . . . any person, regardless of race or color . . . shall be afforded an opportunity to volunteer for induction into the land or naval forces of the United States.” Discrimination in training and selection would not be tolerated. At the same time, another provision of the act declared no man should be inducted for training unless he was “acceptable to the land or naval forces.” As one issue of the NAACP’s *Crisis* magazine objected, the Army had included its provision for Jim Crow within the Selective Service Act.<sup>41</sup>

African American reformers immediately protested the conditions of the Selective Service Act. Local draft administration confirmed their fears, and the act’s wording often thwarted African American attempts to register for the draft; many boards only permitted white men to register. Administrators, particularly in the Air Corps, maintained that military camps lacked housing and other segregated facilities necessary to accommodate black soldiers, and that the services lacked the capacity to train these African American units.<sup>42</sup> More than three million African Americans registered for service, yet draft boards rejected blacks at a rate of 18.2 percent, compared to an 8.5 percent rejection rate for whites.<sup>43</sup>

The military also rationalized this rejection rate through the Army General Classification Test (AGCT). The aptitude test ostensibly measured intelligence and other technical abilities,

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<sup>40</sup> Ulysses Lee, *The Employment of Negro Troops* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1966), 71-73. Public Law 18 of 1939 was one other law that failed to produce results. It authorized the training of black pilots, but because of the social implications—black pilots would have to be assigned to white units—the Army could not make this work, so it did not commission black pilots.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 73. This quote is taken from the Selective Service and Training Act. The quotas stipulated black population in the military would be proportional to that in the country. *Crisis* article, “Along the NAACP Battlefront,” *The Crisis* 48, no. 1 (January 1941): 22.

<sup>42</sup> *Crisis* Editorials, “Discrimination in the Draft,” *The Crisis* 48, no. 1 (January 1941): 7; John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom*, 477.

<sup>43</sup> Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom*, 481.

placing applicants in classes I through V, five being the lowest. A higher percentage of African American enlisted men fell into class V, particularly illiterate Southerners. Consequently, African Americans from the North made up nearly one third of all African Americans in the Armed Forces, despite the fact that they constituted less than one fourth of the total number of African Americans who registered for the draft.<sup>44</sup> Although test scores pointed to a long history of discrimination rather than deficiencies on the part of the black soldier, the AGCT led the military to place larger numbers of African Americans into service units.<sup>45</sup> The Air Corps expected about 47% of black inductees to fall into grade V personnel, and intended to employ them in the manner most advantageous to the Army—by making their primary function that of labor troops and service battalions. The Air Corps placed carefully selected white officers and noncommissioned officers in charge of these units to achieve maximum efficiency. As Army Air Force Assistant Chief of Staff for training, Major General I.H. Edwards explained the rationale in a 1943 memo, “While definite figures are not available, it is believed that the majority of Negroes falling into Grade V are from the South where they have been accustomed to performing common labor under immediate white supervision. If this is the case, little resentment should result on their part for the maintenance of their status quo after donning uniform.”<sup>46</sup> With this justification, the Army Air Corps and later the Army Air Forces used the classification test as one means of relegating African Americans to unskilled labor units.

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<sup>44</sup> Samuel A. Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier: Adjustment During Army Life, Volume I* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1949), 492-494. Bell I. Wiley provided similar statistics in his study *The Training of Negro Troops* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army Field Forces, Historical Selection), 7. Wiley noted that in the typical black unit, 40-50 percent of their strength consisted of Class V personnel. He also noted that the figure did not take into account the “educational handicap of the Negroes” and factors like shorter school terms, inferior teachers, or inadequate educational facilities.

<sup>45</sup> Lee, *The Employment of Negro Troops*, 137.

<sup>46</sup> Memo Major General I.H. Edwards, Assistant Chief of Staff, to Lt. Col. Cuyler AAF, “Utilization of Grade V Negro Personnel,” Draft for Assistant Secretary of War, 17 Feb 1943, folder 1, box 103, Entry 294a; Records of the

The Air Corps resisted attempts to enlist African Americans for years. In 1935 Benjamin Davis Jr. applied to the Army Air Corps from West Point. Since his adolescence and his first experiences with airplanes, Davis had harbored dreams of being a pilot. Although he passed the exam, Davis received a rejection letter approved by the Chief of the Air Corps explaining that the Air Corps did not plan to include any black units.<sup>47</sup> While dismayed by this decision, Davis had just completed three years at West Point. In his tenure as a cadet, the student body “silenced” Davis, meaning that no other cadets spoke to him unless required in the line of duty. Davis had no intention of altering his career aspirations—he was determined to fly.

In 1939 civil rights leaders and organizations exerted increased pressure and forced the Air Corps to begin changing its policies. Actual change arrived gradually. Public Law 18 took effect in April 1939, providing for a large scale expansion of the branch. The law contained a provision that allowed the Secretary of War to provide equipment for aviation training to civilian aviation schools. At the request of Senator Harry H. Schwartz of Wyoming, Congress incorporated an amendment to the bill providing that the Civil Aeronautics Authority should designate one or more of these civilian schools for the training of African American pilots.<sup>48</sup> Congress passed the Civilian Pilot Training Act in June 1939, and the Civil Aeronautics Authority began establishing Civilian Pilot Training Programs. The program created a reserve of

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Army Air Forces Security Classified General Correspondence (NND 730061), Negro 13 Nov 1942-30 Nov 1943, RG 18: Records of the Army Air Forces; NACP.

<sup>47</sup> Benjamin O. Davis, *Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., American: An Autobiography* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 44.

<sup>48</sup> Lee, *The Employment of Negro Troops*, 55.

civilian pilots that the Air Corps could call up in should war break out. Six African American colleges participated in the program.<sup>49</sup>

Yet in spite of the availability of manpower, the Air Corps determined that it did not require the services of black pilots, making the formation of a black unit unnecessary. While the bill authorized the Secretary of War to lend accredited civilian institutions equipment and directed the Civil Aeronautics Authority to establish some training programs for African Americans, nothing explicitly charged the Air Corps to enlist black cadets.<sup>50</sup> Even with pressure from the passage of the Selective Service and Training Act the Air Corps resisted accepting black recruits. The Air Corps did not begin to develop plans for the use of black troops nor accept its share of black draftees from the Selective Service quota until the end of 1940 when it set up Chanute Field, Illinois as a technical training facility for African American airmen and the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama as the facility for training pilots.<sup>51</sup> On January 16, 1941, the War Department announced the creation of the 99<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadron, an “experiment” in African American flight training.<sup>52</sup> In addition to the flight training, the Air Corps began recruiting black support personnel in spring 1941. The Air Corps organized these new recruits into nine aviation squadrons of two hundred and fifty men each and stationed them at bases throughout the South.<sup>53</sup> The Air Corps defined the squadrons’ duties in vague terms, so that local commanders could

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<sup>49</sup> Alan M. Osur, *Blacks in the Army Air Forces During World War II: The Problems of Race Relations* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, 1976), 21.

<sup>50</sup> Lee, *The Employment of Negro Troops*, 57.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 24.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 25.

assign the black airmen to whatever tasks they deemed fit.<sup>54</sup> While African Americans could now serve in the Air Corps, their troubles had only begun. Discrimination, maltreatment, and expectations of their failure assailed them from every side. In spite of these trials, African-American activists and potential airmen scored a major victory in their quest to be included as the nation mobilized for war. Prior to this point, only the ground Army accepted African-American recruits.

The Navy took a bit longer to open its ranks to African Americans. Before 1942 it only accepted African Americans as mess attendants, serving meals to officers on board ships and at shore stations, and doing general kitchen duties. Until the twentieth century, however, the Navy, which Roosevelt had helped lead as Assistant Secretary (1913-1920), actually had a larger black enlistment rate than the Army, and allowed African Americans to serve in a number of capacities, integrated on ships though not in leadership positions.<sup>55</sup> Even with Roosevelt's black cabinet and new defense appointments in 1940, the Navy remained static when it came to increasing black enlistment or employing them in other capacities.<sup>56</sup> In July 1940 President Roosevelt appointed Frank Knox, publisher of the *Chicago Tribune*, 1936 Republican vice-presidential candidate, and former Rough Rider, as Secretary of the Navy. Knox did not go so far as to work actively against the advancement of African Americans in the Navy, but he did not promote racial change or progress.

In 1940 the Navy articulated its fundamental mission as maintaining the service "in strength and readiness to uphold National policies and interests, and to guard the United States

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 114.

<sup>55</sup> Nalty, *Strength for the Fight*, 185.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 185.

and its continental and overseas possessions.”<sup>57</sup> Knox explained in a public statement that year that to maintain efficiency, the Navy could only accept young men of the highest mental, physical, and moral standards for service. The Navy already had a waitlist of over three thousand young men. Since the Navy projected an image of clean and honorable behavior, according to Knox, “there can be no lowering of our high standards in the interest of any one group or individual. . . . I do not believe that it would be sound policy to lower our standards in any respect, no matter how laudable our motives.”<sup>58</sup> Knox further elucidated in early 1942, before the Navy opened its ranks to African Americans, that as the U.S. entered the most dangerous war in history, this was “not the time to take up a problem so filled with dynamite as this one.”<sup>59</sup> Other branches of the military clung to the same argument. Whenever First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt intervened on behalf of black troops, commanders liked to point out to her that the military was not a social experiment. With the Navy’s position clearly articulated, draft boards felt free to reject African Americans for service because of strict quotas or limits in the need for messmen. Black men who attempted to enlist in Navy as anything other than a mess attendant received a pamphlet entitled, “Information for Colored Men Regarding Enlistment in the Messman Branch of the U.S. Navy.”<sup>60</sup>

Dr. Harold J. Franklin attempted to join the Medical Corps in the Regular Navy in August 1941. After taking his examinations, Franklin waited a month with no word from the

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<sup>57</sup> Speech, Frank Knox, “Naval Policy,” 15 Sept 1940, box 1 Speeches by Secretary Frank Knox 1940-1944, entry 37; General Records of the Department of the Navy, RG 80; NACP.

<sup>58</sup> Speech, Frank Knox, “Navy Policy of Enlisting Recruits,” 7 Aug 1940, box 1 Speeches by Secretary Frank Knox 1940-1944, entry 37; General Records of the Department of the Navy, RG 80; NACP.

<sup>59</sup> Letter, Frank Knox to Gifford Pinchot, Former chief of U.S. Forestry Services, 22 Jan 1942, folder 54-1, box 37, entry 23; Office of Secretary of Navy Knox, 1940-1944; General Records of the Department of the Navy, RG 80; NACP.

<sup>60</sup> Pamphlet, “Information for Colored Men Regarding Enlistment in the Messman Branch of the U.S. Navy,” folder Discrimination “B,” box 2, entry 131-N; Correspondence Concerning Discrimination in the Navy, Records of Special Assistant Addison Walker; General Records of the Department of the Navy, RG 80; NACP.

Navy Department. Finally, he contacted authorities to check the status of his application. The commander chairing the examining board at the Brooklyn Naval Hospital confirmed that Franklin made high marks on the oral, practical, and written examinations; they found him physically fit, and recommended his appointment. Yet after the conversation, the Navy took no additional steps to induct Franklin. Throughout September, he made repeated applications and inquiries in attempts to verify his physical fitness. He applied for the Naval Reserve, making sure the examining physician paid particular attention to items such as blood pressure, “I did this particularly because medical men like to feel that all Negroes have high blood pressure and have syphilis,” wrote Dr. Franklin. Having proved to his satisfaction that he was physically fit and that the rejection was based on prejudice, Dr. Franklin brought the matter to the attention of the NAACP.

In mid-October, Franklin received a letter from Secretary Knox’s office, explaining that Franklin lacked a minimum of two directly opposed molars on the left side of his dental arch. They also claimed that Franklin suffered from high blood pressure immediately after exercise—disqualifying him from Navy service. The department explained that the board of medical examiners erred when they reported him physically fit for service. As this discrepancy between local boards’ findings and the Departments’ happened from time to time, the department desired “to dispel any feeling of discrimination you may entertain.”<sup>61</sup>

Another volunteer, historian John Hope Franklin, attempted to enlist in the Navy in 1940. While he considered himself essentially nonviolent, Franklin wanted to use his talents and training to serve his country. Eager to do his part, he advertised his skills to the Navy recruiter,

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<sup>61</sup> “Dr. Franklin tells how the Navy contradicted itself,” in the NAACP pamphlet, *Our “Democratic” Navy*, Nov 1941, box 1, entry 131-N; Correspondence Concerning Discrimination in the Navy, Records of Special Assistant Addison Walker; General Records of the Department of the Navy, RG 80; NACP. Franklin included a copy of the letter Frank Knox to Dr. Franklin, 17 Oct 1941.

reeling off qualifications that included a Ph.D. from Harvard University. The recruiter looked at him incredulously and responded that Franklin lacked one qualification—color. The Navy had strict limitations on black enlistment. Franklin murmured “something to the effect that I thought there was a national emergency, but I was obviously mistaken,” and left with the “same feeling that black volunteers must have had when George Washington rejected them in the Continental Army in 1775 or when Abraham Lincoln sent them home when they tried to enlist in the Union Army in 1861.”<sup>62</sup>

Complaints poured into the Department of the Navy on black enlistment. One survey by the Office of War Information found that approximately seven out of ten African Americans felt that the armed forces provided inadequate opportunities for African Americans to participate. Many African Americans further complained that they had little to no opportunity to serve in the Air Corps or Navy.<sup>63</sup> Recruiters handed one young African American man attempting to answer the Navy’s call for radio men the pamphlet on African American enlistment as messmen. His mother wrote to the President, complaining that he had worked with radios for years but the receptionist never even asked for his qualifications.<sup>64</sup>

Brooklyn pharmacist Archie Miller attempted to enlist as a pharmacist 3<sup>rd</sup> class. In spite of his college education and over fifteen years of practical experience, recruiters told him there were no vacancies, though he could enlist as a mess attendant if so inclined. “What a pity at a

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<sup>62</sup> John Hope Franklin, *Mirror to America: The Autobiography of John Hope Franklin* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2005), 105.

<sup>63</sup> Memorandum, “The Negroes’ Role in the War: A Study of White and Colored Opinions,” 8 Jul 1943, folder misc. discrimination, box 1, entry 131-N; Correspondence Concerning Discrimination in the Navy, Records of Special Assistant Addison Walker; General Records of the Department of the Navy, RG 80; NACP.

<sup>64</sup> Letter, Arindell Barrow to Franklin Roosevelt, 25 Jan 1942, folder Discrimination “B,” box 1, Entry 131-N; Correspondence Concerning Discrimination in the Navy, Records of Special Assistant Addison Walker; General Records of the Department of the Navy, RG 80; NACP.

time like this that race, creed, and color cannot be forgotten,” wrote Miller to the President. “This is not to my mind a white mans [sic] war but a war between the peoples of the United States and Japan, and any discrimination shown in either branch of the armed forces at this time is contrary to your policy.” Miller closed, however, with a plea to be allowed to serve as a pharmacist in the Navy.<sup>65</sup> Yet with each complaint that the Navy received, it responded with a standard letter: under present regulations blacks could only enlist as mess attendants. The writer might be interested to know, however, that the Navy was considering the possibility of opening other branches of service to blacks.<sup>66</sup>

In January of 1942 heavyweight champion Joe Louis, later a soldier, fought Buddy Baer in Madison Square Garden and donated the proceeds to the Navy Relief Fund. “If Joe wanted to enlist in the Navy the day after the fight he’d have to go as a servant, a waiter, a mess attendant,” reported the *Springfield Union*.<sup>67</sup> The Jamaica, New York branch of the NAACP appealed to Secretary Knox before the fight, declaring that every American held the patriotic duty to contribute to the wellbeing of people fighting in defense of the nation. They petitioned Knox to do everything in his power to convince the president to “practice real democracy.”<sup>68</sup> While the

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<sup>65</sup> Letter, Archie Miller to Franklin D. Roosevelt, 23 Jan 1942, folder Discrimination “M,” box 1, Entry 131-N; Correspondence Concerning Discrimination in the Navy, Records of Special Assistant Addison Walker; General Records of the Department of the Navy, RG 80; NACP

<sup>66</sup> The standard letter response (with slight variations) from the Special Assistant’s Office: “Under present regulations, Negroes are enlisted in the Navy as mess attendants but it will interest you to know that the Navy Department is now studying the possibility of opening other branches of the service to members of the colored race.” Letter, Addison Walker to Archie A. Miller, folder Discrimination “M,” box 1, Entry 131-N; Correspondence Concerning Discrimination in the Navy, Records of Special Assistant Addison Walker; General Records of the Department of the Navy, RG 80; NACP.

<sup>67</sup> “Navy and Joe Louis,” 9 Jan 1942, *Springfield Union*, folder Discrimination “C,” box 1, Entry-131-N; Correspondence Concerning Discrimination in the Navy, Records of Special Assistant Addison Walker; General Records of the Department of the Navy, RG 80; NACP.

<sup>68</sup> Letter, Jamaica, NY Branch of NAACP to Frank Knox, 18 Dec 1941, folder 54-1 , box 37, entry 23; Office of the Secretary of Navy Knox, 1940-1944; General Records of the Navy, RG 80; NACP.

Navy limited opportunities for African Americans, the United States Marine Corps simply did not accept African Americans into its ranks at all until the Navy expanded its program in 1942.

As the letters of Addison Walker, Special Assistant to Assistant Secretary of the Navy Ralph Bard indicated, the Navy had considered opening up other specializations to African Americans. In July 1941 it set up a committee to investigate the extent to which enlisted personnel of the Navy and Marine Corps actually represented all American citizens—the inclusiveness of their programs. The “Watson Committee,” headed by Marine Corps Colonel Thomas Watson, explored the possibility of offering blacks broader opportunities as enlisted personnel. At its inception, the committee focused mainly on the reasons that offering expanded roles for African Americans was impracticable. Logistically speaking, the Navy would have a difficult time maintaining segregation if other specializations opened to African Americans. In addition, the committee determined that as African Americans possessed lower intelligence levels and moral standards, finding qualified black applicants would be a challenge. They argued that the Navy would have to process more applications just to meet quotas.<sup>69</sup>

Even as mobilization accelerated following Pearl Harbor, the committee found much the same. It contended that opening up general service to African Americans would place an added burden on Navy recruiting facilities, lowering the entire Navy’s high morale and efficiency. In late December 1941 Lieutenant Commander A.D. Chandler, Captain Francis Whiting, and Colonel Watson signed such a majority report for the committee, while Special Assistant Addison Walker issued a minority report about the responsibility of the Navy toward all American citizens and a citizen’s right to fight for his country. The majority report found that

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<sup>69</sup> “Minutes of Second Meeting of the Watson Committee,” 11 Aug 1941, folder Watson Committee, box 1, entry 131-D; Correspondence Relating to Discrimination in the Navy 1941-1944; General Records of the Department of the Navy, RG 80; NACP.

because the Navy did not urgently need more men at the time, there should be no increase in the employment of black enlisted men other than as mess attendants. “The Committee believes that within the limitations of the characteristics and intelligence of the members of certain races the enlisted personnel of the Naval Establishment is representative of all the citizens of the United States. Therefore no corrective measures are necessary.”<sup>70</sup>

President Roosevelt was unhappy. As the Navy’s number two official from 1913 to 1920 Roosevelt understood the service well, and he believed that the committee could work out some special assignments for black personnel without embroiling the entire organization in the race debate. Accordingly, Roosevelt intervened on behalf of African Americans, pressuring Knox and limiting the admirals’ determinations on the roles for African Americans. In spite of the doubts Knox expressed about African American servicemen, the President converted Knox into an ally. In effect, it required presidential pressure to open the door to African Americans in the Navy.<sup>71</sup>

In April 1942 the Navy and the Marine Corps announced plans for change on the racial front. The Navy planned to take approximately a thousand African Americans per month for general service, via the draft or enlistment. Requests to join poured in, but the Navy needed to create the separate training facilities it deemed necessary to take this new step, deciding upon Great Lakes, Illinois and Hampton, Virginia as the main sites of training for African American recruits. In June 1942 the Navy started accepting African Americans for general service, providing eight weeks of training at Great Lakes with an opportunity to qualify for a sixteen

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<sup>70</sup> Watson Committee, “Majority Report,” 24 Dec 1941; folder Colonel Watson Committee, box 2, entry 131-D; Correspondence Relating to Discrimination in the Navy 1941-1944; General Records of the Department of the Navy, RG 80; NACP.

<sup>71</sup> Nalty, *Strength for the Fight*, 190.

week vocational school at the Hampton Institute in Virginia. There, qualifying sailors trained as electricians, carpenters, ship fitters, machinists, metal smiths, firemen, and cooks.<sup>72</sup> Yet the plan did not provide outlets for African Americans already in the Navy, unable to transfer out of the stewards' branch with the announcement. The NAACP inquired about options for messmen wishing to change their rating, but the Bureau of Navigation responded that to prevent a shortage in the stewards' branch, it could not change the policy.<sup>73</sup> Not until May 1945 did Secretary of the navy James Forrestal allow messmen to change specialties. The Navy still insisted, however, that it was not practicable to allow large concentrations of African Americans to be assigned to a particular activity.<sup>74</sup>

In the spring of 1942, the Marine Corps announced plans to accept African Americans. The first battalion of black marines, to number some nine hundred, enlisted in the Marine Corps Reserve in June and July 1942. Black volunteers formed composite battalions including all combat arms of ground forces—artillery, anti-aircraft, machine guns, tank and infantry, and trades. While the Marine Corps did not have a training center prepared, the Navy Department placed these African American recruits temporarily on inactive duty status until the center

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<sup>72</sup> Navy Department Press Release, "Recruiting of Negroes to Begin June 1," 20 May 1942, folder Addison Walker—Misc. Discrimination, box 1, Entry-131-N; Correspondence Concerning Discrimination in the Navy, Records of Special Assistant Addison Walker; General Records of the Department of the Navy, RG 80; NACP.

<sup>73</sup> Letter, Addison Walker to Walter White, 4 Aug 1942, folder NAACP, box 1, Entry 131-N; Correspondence Concerning Discrimination in the Navy, Records of Special Assistant Addison Walker; General Records of the Department of the Navy, RG 80; NACP.

<sup>74</sup> Committee on Negro Personnel to Secretary of the Navy, "Report and Recommendations of Committee on Negro Personnel," folder Reports from Members of Secretary's Committee, box 8, Entry 131-S; UnderSecretary of the Navy James Forrestal Correspondence Relating to Meetings of Top Policy Group, 1944-1947; General Records of the Department of the Navy, RG 80; NACP.

opened up near New River, North Carolina, close to the large Marine Corps post, Camp Lejeune: a place called Montford Point.<sup>75</sup>

These simultaneous announcements for the Navy and Marines created a stir in the black community. Many remained skeptical of the military's ability to implement real change. Yet reformers did their best to smooth the process and make sure the Navy enforced its new policies. John Sengstacke, editor of the *Chicago Defender*, wrote to one commander that the *Defender* wanted to provide every assistance. If, at any time, the paper could contribute its influence and better public relations between African Americans and the Navy, the Navy should not hesitate to ask. Upon hearing this, Special Assistant Addison Walker responded that this confirmed his belief that African Americans, even the Navy's bitterest critics, were anxious to cooperate. It was all, wrote Walker, the result of a little effort to create better understanding.<sup>76</sup>

Yet while the policy changed in 1942, the practice often did not. In 1945 a young man named David Dinkins, later the first black mayor of New York City, attempted to join the Marine Corps. Dinkins acted before turning 18 so as to join the branch of his choice before being drafted. In his estimation, the Marine Corps possessed the reputation for the best trained and fiercest fighters—though the smart dress blues might have swayed his preference just a bit. He first attempted to sign up in Trenton, New Jersey, but when he found no recruiting office he traveled to a number of other cities: Newark, Camden, Jersey City, New York City, and Philadelphia. At each stop, however, he received one of two responses: either they reached their quota of black marines, or he had to enlist in the state of his residence. In Philadelphia, Dinkins

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<sup>75</sup> Navy Department Press Release, "Marines Announce Plans for Recruiting Negroes," 20 May 1942, folder Addison Walker—Misc. Discrimination, box 1, entry 131-N; Correspondence Concerning Discrimination in the Navy, Records of Special Assistant Addison Walker; General Records of the Department of the Navy, RG 80; NACP.

<sup>76</sup> Letter, John Sengstacke to Commander Edward Hayes, 2 Jun 1942, folder 54-1, box 37, entry 23; Office of the Secretary of Navy Knox, 1940-1944; General Records of the Navy, RG 80; NACP.

finally found a recruiting office willing to let him fill out paperwork, only to fail him for high blood pressure in the physical. Persistent, Dinkins went to other doctors' offices for second opinions before returning to the draft board in Philadelphia, where he finally passed the physical and found himself in the Marine Corps.<sup>77</sup> The policy change did not make the road to military service for African Americans significantly easier.

Despite the difficulties African American encountered as they attempted to join the military, they insisted upon taking part in the mobilization and impending war, entreating authorities to allow them to join the fight. Their struggles revealed a frustrated desire to be Americans. As writer Toni Morrison wrote years later, "American means white, and Africanist people struggle to make the term applicable to themselves with ethnicity and hyphen after hyphen after hyphen."<sup>78</sup> When African Americans insisted upon taking part in the country's fight, and in joining the military, they advocated for a first-class citizenship, pushed the boundaries of the colorline, and argued that they, too, qualified as Americans. W.E.B. Du Bois wrote his controversial editorial, "Close Ranks," in 1918, advocating African Americans coming together with whites in support of the war effort. African Americans should set aside their special grievances, he wrote, and temporarily ignore racial discrimination to join the fight for democracy. With intense criticism from the black community, Du Bois defended his article, responding: "This is Our Country: we have worked for it, we have suffered for it, we have fought for it; we have made its music, we have tinged its ideals, its poetry, its religion, its

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<sup>77</sup> "David Dinkins, National Visionary," interview not attributed/dated, National Visionary Leadership Project, 2002-2008, accessed March 21, 2014, <http://www.visionaryproject.com/dinkinsdavid/>.

<sup>78</sup> Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 47.

dreams.”<sup>79</sup> In later years Du Bois became less certain of his attitude; as he grew older he better understood the repercussions of war.<sup>80</sup> Yet he also remembered that he “became during the World War nearer to feeling myself a real and full American than ever before or since.”<sup>81</sup> When he explained double consciousness, Du Bois mused that at some point every black American wrestled with the question of American identity. They struggled with questions such as: in striving to be black, did one perpetuate racial segregation? Did that place a greater obligation on African Americans to assert nationality?<sup>82</sup> Du Bois argued that the suppression of black identity was neither helpful nor desirable; indeed, minorities needed to maintain a racial identity until human brotherhood became a practical reality.<sup>83</sup> A “vast veil” shut African Americans out of American life, and African Americans experienced a constant longing to attain “self-conscious manhood,” to be black and American, rejecting separate identities in order to forge a better and truer self.<sup>84</sup>

Black American writers also explored the African American claim to American identity during the war. Poet Owen Dodson explored similar themes in *Powerful Long Ladder*, published in 1946. He wrote about war and the scars it left on humanity, but also discussed the specific dilemmas African American troops faced during the war and upon their return home. In one poem, “Black Mother Praying,” Dodson depicted a mother praying for her sons’ safe return from overseas. Yet the mother also fumed about the African American situation on the homefront;

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<sup>79</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn* in *W.E.B. Du Bois: Writings* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 1986), 740.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 741. Du Bois wrote in the 1940 book that he could not see that a German triumph in 1918 could have had worse results for African-Americans than the Allied victory.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Conservation of Races,” in *W.E.B. Du Bois: Writings*, 821.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 825.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 822; W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, in *W.E.B. Du Bois: Writings*, 365.

they lived in fear, exhausted in body in spirit. In spite of this, when her sons joined up, they “didn’t think about it cept it were freedom; Didn’t think cause they was black they wasn’t American.”<sup>85</sup> Better they die in a desert battling for freedom, she seethed, than to come back and see they fought in vain. Yet through her anger, the mother laid claim to an American identity for her sons, though home may not have held any refuge.

Poet Margaret Walker also established a claim to an American identity in her 1942 work, *For My People*. As Du Bois wrote, African Americans helped to make the country what it was—building it and contributing to the formation of American culture. Walker focused a great deal on the South and folk tradition, associating her identity with the rural southern blacks. Racial attitudes in the South represented broader racial attitudes in the United States, though somewhat amplified. In her poem “Delta,” Walker wrote:

Love overwhelms our living with longing  
strengthening flesh and blood within us  
banding the iron of our muscles with anger  
making us men in the fields we have tended  
Standing defending the land we have rendered  
rich and abiding and heavy with plenty.

We with our blood have watered these fields  
and they belong to us.  
Valleys and dust of our bodies are blood brothers  
and they belong to us.<sup>86</sup>

The South was home—a land filled with black blood and sweat. The speaker called to her people, lamenting the hardships and degradations, but also asking them to stand strong “with

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<sup>85</sup> Owen Dodson, *Powerful Long Ladder* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1946), 8.

<sup>86</sup> Margaret Walker, *For My People* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1942), 24.

singing that is ours”<sup>87</sup> She staked a claim to the land that African Americans helped to create, described the feelings of anger that their treatment created, and explained why they would stand to defend the country. Yet like Du Bois, Walker noted the limited extent to which African Americans were allowed to claim this American-ness. Throughout the volume the speaker often conveyed a sense of displacement. In her poem, “Sorrow Home,” Walker lamented, “O Southland, sorrow home, melody beating in my bone and blood! How long will the Klan of hate, the hounds and the chain gangs keep me from my own?”<sup>88</sup> Though she considered herself and her people natives, America rejected them at the same time. African American claim to the land symbolized an essential part of African American identity. Black poets enunciated why, as the country mobilized for war, African Americans stood up and defended the country—they were establishing a claim in spite of their treatment as less than American. They strove to merge the two identities into one, to be American instead of the other.

As if to illustrate this point, letters poured into the War Department from civilians and prospective troops alike, asking and demanding that blacks have the chance to defend the country and prove their loyalty. “Negroes have always been loyal to the United States,” wrote one man. “We always intend to be. All we want is an opportunity.”<sup>89</sup> One World War I veteran wrote that he felt it was his duty in 1918 to join the Army and he felt the same way now. Unfortunately, the military refused him because of his race, explaining that quotas were full. What did one need to do, he asked, “to prove to you all I am still willing to sacrifice my life for

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>89</sup> Letter, Kenton Jackson to Franklin Roosevelt, 24 Jun 1941, box 1082, entry 363-a; Army AG Decimal File 1940-1945, 291.2 (Race); Records of the Adjutant General’s Office, RG 407; NACP.

my country?”<sup>90</sup> Another young man wishing to join the Marine Corps wrote to the President in distress when in March, 1942 a recruiter told him, “colored boys are not allowed to enlist in the United States Marines.” African Americans have never been cowards, wrote the young man, nor have they ever failed to give their all to the government. “My father was in the powder division of the United States Navy during the Spanish American war. I too, wish to serve the government which protects all of its peoples.”<sup>91</sup> To an extent, the insistence upon inclusion worked: the military opened up new opportunities for African Americans. Yet their troubles had just begun, and as African Americans entered the military and moved to military bases throughout the country, they encountered ugly and unrelenting discrimination from the military and civilians. As tensions grew, African American troops lashed out more frequently, demonstrating a new militancy beyond lost patience.

Initially the Army offered greater opportunities for African Americans, though it maintained segregation throughout the war, creating logistical problems. The service attempted to solve these issues by using all-black divisions, as in the First World War. In the spring of 1942 the Army stationed the all-black 93<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division at Fort Huachuca, Arizona, far from civilian communities in order to minimize protest and racial friction.<sup>92</sup> Yet with the isolation and strict rules—the soldiers could not own automobiles—conditions deteriorated.<sup>93</sup> The Army also discovered that for large units like the 93<sup>rd</sup> or 92<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Divisions, isolated camps were in

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<sup>90</sup> Letter, Robert Boatwright to Adjutant General, 12 Jan 1942, box 1082, entry 363-a; Army AG Decimal File 1940-1945, 291.2 (Race); Records of the Adjutant General’s Office, RG 407; NACP.

<sup>91</sup> Letter, Scott Edward Burriss to President Roosevelt, 9 Mar 1942, folder Discrimination “B,” box 1, entry 131-N; Concerning Discrimination in the Navy, Records of Special Assistant Addison Walker; General Records of the Department of the Navy, RG 80; NACP.

<sup>92</sup> Lee, *The Employment of Negro Troops*, 106.

<sup>93</sup> Nalty, *Strength for the Fight*, 164.

short supply. Indeed, in 1942 there existed no post large and isolated enough to house the 92<sup>nd</sup>. As a result, the Army split the division into regiments and activated them at different posts in Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, and Indiana. The 92<sup>nd</sup> did not reassemble until the 93<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division left Huachuca, making it available. In combat in later years, the 92<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division experienced a host of problems, in part from dispersed training.

In addition, like some of the other branches, the Army held the impression that southern whites “handled” African Americans the best, as they had the most experience. As the only branch that did not subscribe to this theory, the Navy quickly learned to “steer clear of the ‘I’m from the South—I know how to handle ‘em’ variety.’” With reference to white personnel, the Navy argued that “deeply accented southern whites are not generally suited for Negro battalions.”<sup>94</sup> The Army had other ideas. As a result, the service stationed the majority of African Americans in the South, preferring white commanding officers. With the southern reputation for egregious human rights violations, black troops held deep seated fears of the journey south. Poet Dudley Randall, an Army veteran, wrote a poem about this journey, describing the Mason Dixon line as the “boundary to hell.” Black blood dyed the southern ground red, he wrote. Yet in spite of the horrors the South held, Randall, like poet Margaret Walker, claimed the South as his own. “I have to love you,” he lamented in a 1943 poem, “though my griefs like troubled streams have flowed.”<sup>95</sup> Their fears were not unfounded. In the prewar mobilization, troops found a black soldier hanging from a tree at Fort Benning, Georgia,

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<sup>94</sup> Bureau of Naval Personnel, *The Negro in the Navy: United States Naval Administrative History of World War II #84*, 1947. Naval History and Heritage Command Library, Washington, D.C.

<sup>95</sup> Dudley Randall, “The Southern Road,” in *Roses and Revolutions: The Selected Writings of Dudley Randall*, ed. Melba Joyce Boyd (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2009), 70.

his hands bound behind his back. The Army declared it a suicide, but the soldiers knew better.<sup>96</sup> While racism existed throughout the country, black troops knew that violence and danger were more prevalent in the South.

In some cases, African Americans from the North experienced true segregation for the first time. When one new recruit arrived at Fort McClellan, Alabama, he had heard stories of the South although he had never been below the Ohio River. He recalled that the black soldiers waited in the mess hall until white soldiers finished eating; it felt like a slap in the face—the first time he really experienced discrimination.<sup>97</sup> Another recruit from Burlington, New Jersey partied on the train with the white recruits en route to Fort McClellan. When the train stopped in Washington, D.C., authorities separated the races before continuing south.<sup>98</sup> Drafted in 1942, Isham G. Benton reported to Fort Harrison, Indiana before traveling south to Camp Wheeler, Georgia. Upon the recruits' arrival at Wheeler, Benton recollected a white colonel addressed them and warned them that it did not matter what city they came from—Pittsburgh, Chicago, Detroit—they were in Georgia now.<sup>99</sup> Private First Class Dorothy C. Bray of the Women's Army Corps Detachment at Camp Claiborne, Louisiana found much the same when she traveled to Baton Rouge, Louisiana to spend the weekend with her fiancé, a young man stationed at Camp Van Dorn, Mississippi. She had no trouble purchasing tickets or boarding a bus to Baton Rouge,

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<sup>96</sup> Nalty, *Strength for the Fight*, 164.

<sup>97</sup> A. William Perry, interview by Jerri Donohue, 3 May 2007, A. William Perry Collection, World War II-Korean War Roundtable, Akron, Ohio (AFC/2001/001/51117), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>98</sup> George T. Ridout, interview by Walter Valentine, not dated. George T. Ridout Collection (AFC/2001/001/32824), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>99</sup> Isham G. Benton, interview by Rosalynn West, not dated. Isham G. Benton Collection (AFC/2001/001/28694); Isham G. Benton, interview by Douglas Clanin, not dated, Isham G. Benton Collection (AFC/2001/001/9170), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

and the station agents assured her that she could get a bus back the next day. As her fiancé placed her bags on the return bus, the driver informed them that the bus did not accept “colored” passengers, and she should wait for the next. Three busses passed in this fashion, each driver telling her much the same. A white civilian had to intercede on her behalf before Bray could report back to her post. “I had on the same government uniform” as the white soldiers, wrote a furious Bray. “I work with them every day; we eat the same issued food. Yet I am not good enough to ride on the bus behind them? We are clearly not wanted, so why are we here?”<sup>100</sup>

Black troops found the military’s treatment of white German prisoners compared with their own even more deplorable. Lewis Conn vividly recalled his arrival to Fort Hood, Texas. “It destroyed my mind,” he asserted. The community around Fort Hood maintained strict segregation, so while black soldiers could not go to a movie, the German prisoners had the liberty to go wherever white soldiers went, “and here we was going to fight them and training to fight them, but here they had more privilege than I did. It tore us up.”<sup>101</sup> This phenomenon occurred in the North as well. William Perry noted that at Camp Perry, Ohio, the German prisoners “had more freedom and run of the camp than we had.” From what he heard, this was fairly common.<sup>102</sup> Sergeant Eddie Donald of the 761<sup>st</sup> Tank Battalion described this freedom of

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<sup>100</sup> Letter Pfc. Dorothy Bray to the War Department, 4 Oct 1944, folder 5, box II:G1; Part II Veterans Affairs File, 1940-1950; MS 34140 Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>101</sup> Lewis S. Conn, interview with William Bruckner, date, Lewis S. Conn Collection (AFC/2001/001/43716), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>102</sup> A. William Perry, interview by Jerri Donohue, 3 May 2007, A. William Perry Collection, World War II-Korean War Roundtable, Akron, Ohio (AFC/2001/001/51117), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

movement allowed the German POWs as “one of the most repugnant things I can recall of the many things that happened to Negro servicemen.”<sup>103</sup>

Lieutenant Ernest Wright of the Medical Ambulance Corps declared that he witnessed Jim Crow at its worst at Camp Van Dorn, Mississippi in February 1943. He had instructed his men not to frequent Centerville, Mississippi.<sup>104</sup> The only town nearby, it had a population of about 1,200 so it already had very little to offer in the way of entertainment.<sup>105</sup> In town one day, white Military Police (MPs) addressed one of Wright’s sergeants as “boy,” and when the man told the MPs to address him by his rank, the MPs dragged the man off a bus, beating and kicking him. Infuriated, Wright attempted an investigation of the incident, but the Army swept it under the rug. He described the incident as a turning point in his Army career; he realized that the only recourse was to fight Jim Crow in the Army to the best of his abilities.<sup>106</sup> As tensions built, incidents of racial violence became more frequent, particularly in the South. Soon after Wright found his efforts at justice thwarted, the 364<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment arrived at Camp Van Dorn.

The War Department had branded the men of the 364<sup>th</sup> as troublemakers; the unit had created disturbances at previous posts. The regiment arrived at Van Dorn in May of 1943, and racial antagonism ran high. Larger numbers of troops became involved in more frequent racial disturbances, with black troops just as likely to play the aggressors as white troops. Many men in the 364<sup>th</sup> felt that the Army stationed them in Centerville as a punishment, and the lack of

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<sup>103</sup> Eddie Donald, interview by Mary Penick Motley, *The Invisible Soldier: The Experiences of the Black Soldier, World War II* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1987), 162.

<sup>104</sup> Ernest Wright, interview by L.D. Reddick, 17 Apr 1946, folder # 1/12 Reddick Interviews with Servicemen Ti-Z, Lawrence D. Reddick World War II Project, MG 490, SCM 98-19, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (SCRBC), The New York Public Library (NYPL). The material consists of Reddick’s write-up on the interview rather than an exact transcript.

<sup>105</sup> Lee, *The Employment of Negro Troops*, 368.

<sup>106</sup> Ernest Wright, interview by L.D. Reddick, 17 Apr 1946, folder 1/12, Lawrence D. Reddick Project, SCRBC, NYPL.

recreation and entertainment both on base and in town left soldiers resentful. They repeatedly refused to observe segregation laws in the area.<sup>107</sup> Shortly after their arrival at Van Dorn, a series of incidents raised tensions between nearby civilians and black soldiers.

In the first incident, white MPs arrested an African American soldier lacking the proper pass in Centerville. The soldier alleged that the MPs took him into custody and beat him with a strop before releasing him, and a white soldier confined in a nearby room corroborated this account, indicating that he had heard what sounded like a beating and pleading in the next room. The MPs denied the incident, however, and a medical officer reported no evidence of brutalization. The commanding officer at Camp Van Dorn subsequently ordered the investigation dropped. He declared that it served no purpose, “as it was the word of a colored soldier against that of three MPs of good reputation.”<sup>108</sup> Over the next week, discord increased, when the men of the 364<sup>th</sup> repeatedly violated segregation codes. They created a disturbance at a service club, announcing that they “took over” wherever they went and planned to change things at Van Dorn as well.<sup>109</sup> A white officer at the Post Exchange felt threatened by their boisterousness and closed the store. Incensed, a crowd of black soldiers began throwing bottles at the building and threatening the officer. When he left to find backup, they reportedly forced their way into the building, threatening the manager and taking some stock. Two days later a fight between MPs and a black soldier in Centerville escalated when civilian law enforcement engaged, drew their guns, and opened fire on the soldier. The man was pronounced dead shortly

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<sup>107</sup> Lee, *The Employment of Negro Troops*, 366.

<sup>108</sup> Report, Colonel C.C. Park, I.G.D., Inspector General, “Investigation of Disorder in the 364<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment,” to Commanding General, Third Army, Fort Sam Houston, Texas, 16 Jun 1943, folder 364<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, box 150; Records of Headquarters, 3<sup>rd</sup> U.S. Army, Adjutant General Correspondence; Records of U.S. Army Commands, RG 338; NACP.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

after his arrival at the hospital. Subsequently, authorities discovered a break-in to the supply room and reported several rifles missing. Several hundred black soldiers congregated at Van Dorn, surrounding and threatening an MP truck, leading MPs to shoot another black soldier in the crowd.<sup>110</sup> Only some fast talking by the commanding officer convinced the men to disburse following the incident, and it took several more days to locate the missing rifles.<sup>111</sup>

The very arrival of the 364<sup>th</sup> incensed white civilians in Centerville. They called for the immediate removal of the black troops, and upon the Army to prohibit black soldiers from carrying guns or other firearms. Lieutenant Wright, infuriated by the Army's lack of initiative, remarked sardonically that it would be quite a feat if the Army managed to train black soldiers for war without using firearms.<sup>112</sup> In another reported incident, a civilian car forced a military vehicle containing a white officer and black driver off the road. Two white civilians jumped out, drew guns, and shouted that they would "kill any niggers who come here." The War Department concluded that the 364<sup>th</sup> should receive disciplinary action, though perhaps Van Dorn could improve upon recreational facilities available for black troops.<sup>113</sup> Yet the men of the 364<sup>th</sup> remained irate. As one soldier testified during an earlier investigation of the 364<sup>th</sup>, "the negro soldiers are not treated right in the Army . . . and they were glad to see this riot happen . . . [F]our or five white people were hurt. I am sorry that more of them were not killed."<sup>114</sup> In the

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Lee, *The Employment of Negro Troops*, 369.

<sup>112</sup> Ernest Wright, interview by L.D. Reddick, 17 Apr 1946, folder 1/12, Lawrence D. Reddick Project, SCRBC, NYPL.

<sup>113</sup> Report, Colonel C.C. Park, I.G.D., Inspector General, "Investigation of Disorder in the 364<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment," to Commanding General, Third Army, Fort Sam Houston, Texas, 16 Jun 1943, folder 364<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, box 150; Records of Headquarters, 3<sup>rd</sup> U.S. Army, Adjutant General Correspondence; Records of U.S. Army Commands, RG 338; NACP.

<sup>114</sup> Memo, Capt. James Pruitt, Jr. to Commanding Officer 364<sup>th</sup> Infantry Reg., 15 Apr 1943, "Agitators and Troublemakers," 364<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, box 150; Records of Headquarters, 3<sup>rd</sup> U.S. Army, Adjutant General

aftermath of the May 1943 incidents, General Lesley J. McNair, the head of the Army Ground Forces, decided that the unit should remain at Van Dorn, but restricted the men from visiting town.<sup>115</sup>

In the spring and summer of 1943 serious racial disturbances occurred at Camp Stewart, Georgia; Lake Charles, Louisiana; March Field and camp San Luis Obispo, California; Fort Bliss, Texas; Camp Phillips, Kansas; Camp Breckinridge, Kentucky; and Camp Sheriago, Pennsylvania.<sup>116</sup> Tensions had reached a boiling point, and reports of other, smaller clashes surfaced as well. Discrimination in medical treatment, offensive racial epithets, and violence against black soldiers created resentment and low morale. Judge William Hastie warned Secretary of War Stimson that the Army could no longer afford to ignore the situation.<sup>117</sup> Yet with each complaint of discrimination, the War Department sent a standard response: official policy did not permit discrimination on the basis of race, creed or color; implying that because it was not allowed it did not exist. The treatment and the clashes took a toll on black morale. Their letters and complaints about the military's treatment reflected their fears and discouragement. A soldier at Camp McCain, Mississippi wrote to the President describing the pervasive fear that black soldiers in the South experienced. "They are afraid for their lives," he wrote; "we have no protection against these white folks. . . . I have seen them sit down and cry like babies. . . . when a man cries, it's bad. I am sure that there will be not just a mere riot here,

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Correspondence; Records of U.S. Army Commands, RG 338; NACP. Letter, John Sengstacke to Commander Edward Hayes, 2 Jun 1942, folder 54-1, box 37, entry 23; Office of the Secretary of Navy Knox, 1940-1944; General Records of the Navy, RG 80; NACP.

<sup>115</sup> Lee, *The Employment of Negro Troops*, 369.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid*, 369.

<sup>117</sup> Wiley, *The Training of Negro Troops*, 97.

but a revolution.”<sup>118</sup> First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt received a report on a black soldier stationed in the South who wrote that “we can’t even leave camp without some of the boys getting beat up.” The soldier vented his frustration to a friend, saying “I’m not taking anything else off these white people,” and that oftentimes he had “to laugh to keep from crying.”<sup>119</sup> Black soldiers throughout the country expressed the same feelings, some even attempted suicide. One black sergeant in the 83<sup>rd</sup> Signal Heavy Construction Battalion overdosed on sleeping pills. When he regained consciousness in the hospital, the soldier declared he “would rather die than be a member of the 83<sup>rd</sup>.”<sup>120</sup>

Black soldiers faced this maltreatment from white soldiers and civilians alike, and with mainly white officers, superiors had little sympathy for their troubles. African Americans in the services had few opportunities for advancement. The Army Ground Forces offered black soldiers a greater range of specializations than did the other services and Army organizations, but many still found it difficult to gain admission to Officer Candidate School (OCS). The War Department feared that a surplus of black officers could lead to putting blacks in charge of whites. As a result, quotas and numbers rather than leadership abilities or other qualifications often determined whom the Army accepted for OCS. The military also found it difficult to provide separate accommodations for black officers both in housing and recreation.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Letter, Anonymous soldier, Camp McCain, Mississippi to Commander-in-Chief, 2 Nov 1942, box 1072, entry 363a; Army A-G Decimal File 1940-1945; Records of the Adjutant General’s Office, RG 407, NACP.

<sup>119</sup> Mrs. Billie Murphy to Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, 30 Jun 1941, box 1082, entry 363a; Army A-G Decimal File 1940-1945; Records of the Adjutant General’s Office, RG 407, NACP.

<sup>120</sup> Report, “Attempted Suicides,” not dated, folder 7, box II:G1; Part II Veterans Affairs File, 1940-1950; MS 34140 Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>121</sup> Lee, *The Employment of Negro Troops*, 212-213.

When Isham G. Benton arrived at Camp Wheeler, Georgia, he made high marks on his Army General Classification Test, making him eligible for OCS. The candidates then had to appear in front of a review board for an oral examination. Before the exam, Benton recalled that a white captain pulled his group aside and told them that while they had already accomplished something worthy of recognition, but they needed to project a certain image in front of the board—by exhibiting the appropriate deference to whites. The officers reviewing them would not be interested in their intellect or leadership abilities, explained the captain. Rather, they sought to probe the candidates’ attitudes. A question as innocuous as, “Who is the president of the United States,” had social implications; the appropriate response was, “Mr. Franklin D. Roosevelt,” as whites in the South would deem it unseemly for an African American to refer to whites without deference. Benton passed the board of review three times, but each time the Army informed him that it had already filled the quotas.<sup>122</sup> Another sergeant at Fort Dix complained to the NAACP that he submitted his application to OCS three times. Each time he received a negative response: first that nobody could take his place as company clerk; then, nobody was available to replace him as Personnel Sergeant Major. In his last attempt he appeared before the board but only received a partial examination before his rejection. Shortly thereafter his unit deployed.<sup>123</sup>

The NAACP paid close attention to discrimination against black soldiers in the United States and abroad. In its investigation of the allegations of discrimination at Fort Dix, however,

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<sup>122</sup> Isham G. Benton, Interview by Rosalynn West, not dated. Isham George Benton Collection (AFC/2001/001/28694), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>123</sup> Letter, John Williams to unknown, not dated, folder 7, box II:G1; Part II Veterans Affairs File, 1940-1950; MS 34140 Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. This document is part of a series of letters complaining about lack of promotional opportunities at Ft. Dix, NJ.

the group found that it had little traction in the matter of OCS. White troops likewise found it difficult to obtain OCS appointments.<sup>124</sup> While segregation and racism constantly plagued black troops, African-American servicemen often perceived non-racial issues as racially driven.<sup>125</sup> All soldiers might complain about low pay, but black soldiers might identify the issue as racial. Indeed, the military and society routinely treated them as inferiors, and the constant barrage of racism inspired feelings of uncertainty, paranoia, and insecurity. As with Camp Van Dorn, black troops were reaching a breaking point. After struggling for inclusion in the military, they faced subjugation and ridicule as they remained in training camps while the War Department puzzled over what to do with them. The Army did not begin sending black combat troops overseas until 1944.

African Americans in the other services confronted similar situations. Even after the Navy and the Marines opened up their ranks to African Americans in the spring and summer of 1942, Navy recruiters still “encouraged” African Americans to become messmen, generally by neglecting to inform recruits that other opportunities existed. In 1940 a group of messmen aboard the USS *Philadelphia* wrote to the *Pittsburgh Courier* complaining that recruiters informed them that upon joining the Navy and finishing qualifying examinations, they could change to other specializations. Instead, they had little to no opportunity for advanced ratings, and the Navy limited their work to jobs such as waiting tables and making beds. They

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<sup>124</sup> Memo, Robert L. Carter to Walter White, “Re: Fort Dix Situation,” 9 Jun 1945, folder 7, box II:G1; Part II Veterans Affairs File, 1940-1950; MS 34140 Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. This document is part of a series of letters complaining about lack of promotional opportunities at Ft. Dix, NJ.

<sup>125</sup> Samuel Stouffer, *The American Soldier: Adjustment During Army Life*, vol 1 *Studies in Social Psychology in World War II* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1949-1950), 502.

discouraged other African Americans from choosing the branch.<sup>126</sup> The Navy subsequently dismissed the authors from the service with undesirable discharges.<sup>127</sup>

In 1945, seventeen-year-old Noah Oliver lived in Chattanooga, Tennessee with his family. The young man glimpsed a recruitment poster depicting beaches and beautiful girls: “Join the Navy,” suggested the poster, “See the World.” Determined to see the world, if not join the Navy, Oliver asked his father to take the family on such a trip. Quickly rebuffed, he resolved to find the beach on his own. Oliver found someone to sign the papers; he joined the Navy and by afternoon the young man was on a train to Bainbridge, Maryland (unbeknownst to his father). When they arrived, the Navy fed the recruits hot food and sent them to bed. At 6 a.m. the next morning, they woke the recruits, gave them a haircut and a uniform. “That was when the trouble started,” Oliver recalled, “you’re in the Navy now.”<sup>128</sup> In 1943 the Bureau of Naval Personnel had established a steward’s school at Norfolk, Virginia, and another later at Bainbridge, Maryland. With these establishments, the Navy intended to standardize steward training, though facilities did not notably improve and the locations served to isolate many of the stewards.<sup>129</sup> There at the segregated base, Oliver and his fellow recruits learned to be steward’s mates: to set up tables, recognize officer uniforms, and other relevant tasks.

Later, at Shoemaker, California (an integrated base) they learned to shoot and man the guns aboard a ship. Steward’s mates had two duties: fighting at general quarters and taking care

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<sup>126</sup> “Mess Attendants Write:--“Don’t The Navy”: USED MEN AS SEAGOING CHAMBERMAIDS, BELL HOPS, DISHWASHERS Colored Men on the U.S.S. Philadelphia Reveal Almost Unbearable Conditions Aboard Ship— Sign Their Names to Letter.” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, Oct 5, 1940. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Pittsburgh Courier (1911-2002).

<sup>127</sup> Richard E. Miller, *The Messmen Chronicles: African Americans in the U.S. Navy, 1932-1943* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2004), 120, 129.

<sup>128</sup> Noah Oliver, Jr., interview by Michael Willie, not dated. Noah Oliver, Jr., Collection (AFC/2001/001/32827), Veterans History Collection, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

<sup>129</sup> MacGregor, *Integration of the Armed Forces*, 73.

of the officers. En route to Shoemaker and onboard ships the sailors lived together without segregation. “Everybody was the same then,” Oliver recalled, “you never thought about color, you was thinking about who you was gonna be next to or who you could depend on.” What really mattered, he argued, was that the man next to you was an American.<sup>130</sup> The seventeen year old and others enjoyed their time in the Navy; some felt that the experience helped them to grow up, and at times provided a modicum of racial equality. Others found the personal servant character of the position and the work degrading.

Stewards’ mates (the messman’s designation before 1943) spent the majority of time at sea after training at Bainbridge or Norfolk. Following Pearl Harbor and the advent of open warfare at sea, it became apparent that messmen were not just servants. As Noah Oliver pointed out, the Navy trained them to be sailors first. “You’ve got two duties,” remembered another steward. “Everybody’s got their battle station—I don’t care if it’s nothing but ‘stretcher bearer.’ You were also a cook, a steward, or a mess attendant [etc., but that becomes] secondary! That don’t kill no enemy!” At general quarters, stewards’ mates often ended up on gun crews as loaders, gunners, or “hot shell” men—catching the sizzling shells the guns discharged after firing.<sup>131</sup>

While it galled many to perform serving duties, stewards actually experienced more action and traveled further than many black sailors in general service. In spite of the President’s initial pressure on the Navy, the service consistently maintained a lower proportion of African-American servicemen than the other branches or the general population. African Americans constituted about five percent of the total active duty Navy, though this number peaked at ten

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<sup>130</sup> Noah Oliver, Jr., interview by Michael Willie, not dated. Noah Oliver, Jr., Collection (AFC/2001/001/32827), Veterans History Collection, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

<sup>131</sup> Miller, *The Messmen Chronicles*, 178-179.

percent in 1943 due to the manpower policy apportioning black draftees between the Army and Navy.<sup>132</sup> While theoretically, opening the doors for general service unlocked more specialization, the Navy often relegated African Americans outside of the stewards branch to labor units—Construction Battalions or stevedores, ammunition loaders, and maintenance men.<sup>133</sup>

African Americans in the Marine Corps experienced much the same. Black marines began their service at Montford Point in Jacksonville, North Carolina. The Marine Corps began construction of Montford Point in April 1942, shortly after announcing the plan to open the Corps to African Americans. Montford Point was in Onslow County, North Carolina—an impoverished rural county with no urban areas. Low education, extreme poverty, a large white population, and strict segregation characterized the area. African-American marine James Ferguson recalled that, “Jacksonville at that time represented the worst the South had to offer. It was a seedy, run-down military town and everywhere there were signs denoting “Colored,” or “White.”<sup>134</sup> While the presence of Lejeune and Montford Point threatened to disrupt the pattern of rural life, at the same time it provided opportunities for unheard of prosperity for many of the residents, most of whom were eager to embrace the possibility. Despite the town’s desire for the presence of the Marines, atypical in many southern towns, local residents adhered to segregation.<sup>135</sup> The Corps assigned the first recruits to the 51<sup>st</sup> Defense Battalion, a combat unit. In later years, recruits coveted positions in the 51<sup>st</sup> as the Corps increasingly began to assign

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<sup>132</sup> Nalty, *Strength for the Fight*, 190.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>134</sup> James H. Ferguson, *The Story of the Ninth Marine Depot Company* (United States Copyright Office, 1996), 5. Ferguson kept a limited diary of his life in the Marine Corps, detailed here in his book.

<sup>135</sup> Melton A. McLaurin, *The Marines of Montford Point: America’s First Black Marines* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 78.

black troops to service units (depot or ammo companies). Between March 1943 and September 1947, the Corps organized fifty-one depot companies from the Montford Point men.<sup>136</sup>

First Sergeant George Kidd arrived in 1943 and stayed until the camp's close in 1949. He remembered that black and white drill instructors (DI's) alike pummeled the recruits, and when Kidd later became a DI himself, he joined in the practice. The drill instructors used this method, Kidd explained, to make better, tougher Marines. While the Corps later realized that the brutality was unhealthy, it certainly toughened the men.<sup>137</sup> When David Dinkins stepped off the bus at Montford Point in 1945, he immediately encountered the wrath of a black drill instructor; "Bam! He hit me and I bounced," remembered Dinkins. "It takes about three soldiers to make one marine," he contended.<sup>138</sup> Joseph Carpenter (later a Lieutenant Colonel) recalled that upon his arrival, the majority of the DI's were black. The recruits initially viewed this as a positive, explained Carpenter. They soon realized that they were actually worse than white DI's—the black DI's were determined to see the men succeed, to make them into real marines.<sup>139</sup>

On top of the tough training that all marines received, black marines faced constant racial harassment. Dinkins recalled that the white gunnery sergeants told black marines, "alright, niggers, fall in."<sup>140</sup> Though Civilian Aide to the Secretary of War William Hastie attempted to dissuade military personnel from using this language, it remained all too common. The Marine Corps appointed white noncommissioned officers as the first drill instructors at Montford Point,

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<sup>136</sup> Melton A. McLaurin, *The Marines of Montford Point*, 49.

<sup>137</sup> George Kidd, interview by Sarah Barksdale, 7 Nov 2011, Fort Washington, MD.

<sup>138</sup> "David Dinkins, National Visionary," interview not attributed/dated, National Visionary Leadership Project, 2002-2008, accessed March 21, 2014, <http://www.visionaryproject.com/dinkinsdavid/>.

<sup>139</sup> McLaurin, *The Marines of Montford Point*, 50.

<sup>140</sup> "David Dinkins, National Visionary," interview not attributed/dated, National Visionary Leadership Project, 2002-2008, accessed March 21, 2014, <http://www.visionaryproject.com/dinkinsdavid/>.

though it attempted to choose men who exhibited less hostility to the inclusion of African Americans. The Corps selected the black Montford Point trainees carefully, including some men with college educations and prior service. Because of this selectivity, many recruits became full-fledged DI's themselves.<sup>141</sup> Colonel Samuel A. Woods, the first CO at Montford Point, insisted that black recruits receive the same rigorous training as white Marines.<sup>142</sup>

Drafted in 1943, James Ferguson considered himself fortunate to be in the Marines. He and his fellows arrived at Montford Point in late May, got their clothing, gear, and a hut, and then a couple days later, “around 4:00 A.M. all hell broke loose. Drill instructors came running through our hut yelling and cussing, throwing men out of their beds. All I could hear was, GET UP, GET YOUR BUTTS OUT OF BED, FALL OUT FALL OUT ON THE COMPANY STREET! We were in the Marine Corps now. From then on it was all running and marching.”<sup>143</sup>

Men in other branches experienced much the same. Those accepted for general service in the Navy trained at Great Lakes Naval Training Center, north of Chicago. Qualified sailors then moved to other bases or schools for specialized training, while others landed at bases such as Port Chicago for labor detail. In basic training at Camp Robert Smalls, the black camp at Great Lakes, the recruits experienced a rude awakening, remembered one sailor. They had scarcely stepped off the bus when “they started yelling at us, look where I tell you to look, take your hands out of your pockets!” Sailors learned how to use every weapon available so they had the ability to perform Marine duties as well. Laney recalled that whether the recruits could swim or

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<sup>141</sup> Nalty, *Strength for the Fight*, 200.

<sup>142</sup> McLaurin, *The Marines of Montford Point*, 49.

<sup>143</sup> Ferguson, *The Story of the Ninth Marine Depot Company*, 5.

not, they climbed a tower and either jumped or were pushed into the water, “off the tower, into burning water holding your testicles, swim under the oil slick. And I didn’t have much sense as I was seventeen so I didn’t have a problem with it.”<sup>144</sup>

At Great Lakes the black sailors encountered varying degrees of racism. One remembered that his first day there, as the recruits marched into a drill hall, a boatswains mate stood up on a platform and warned, “you guys got two strikes against you, one for being black, and one for being in the Navy. Now raise your hand and be sworn in.” The boatswains mate then attempted to sign men up for the steward’s branch; anyone who agreed shipped out right away.<sup>145</sup> Following the training at Great Lakes, qualified sailors might attend specialized schools. Men ended up in a variety of places, such as Syracuse or Notre Dame, Newport, Rhode Island to learn small boat handling, or Hampton Virginia for motor machinist school. As they completed their training, they moved to California for labor duty or to embark or to other ports or stations within the United States. Their experiences in the Navy depended largely upon their duties and treatment; men who traveled around the world tended to enjoy their experience more than those laboring in California.

As in the Army, black sailors began exhibiting signs of unrest in the summer of 1943. Dissatisfied with their assignments or set to menial tasks in spite of their qualifications, they expressed anger through such means as hunger strikes. In the summer of 1943 a group of Seabees protested segregated quarters on a transport ship. Yet the most notorious disturbance occurred in July, 1944 at Port Chicago, California. Home to a hard labor detachment, the Navy

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<sup>144</sup> Frederick Laney, Interview by Isaac Prentice, Frederick Laney Collection (AFC/2001/001/21560), Veterans Oral History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>145</sup> Arthur Howard Busby, Sr., interview by Viennease Dennis, Arthur Howard Busby, Sr. Collection (AFC/2001/001/48744), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

did not provide the men at Port Chicago with any training to handle the volatile materials on ships. Every black sailor classified as a seaman, and came from a range of backgrounds—illiterate to college educated. All worked around the clock in shifts for four to five months, with no opportunity for making rank, additional training, or leave. At the outset, Port Chicago boasted only four barracks, no recreation, and no off-duty activity. Just work: eight hours on, sixteen off.<sup>146</sup>

On the night of July 13, 1944 hundreds of tons of ammunition detonated in two explosions, tearing apart two ships and killing 320 men, 202 of them African Americans. The explosion injured an additional 390 military personnel and civilians. A mile and a half away, the second explosion decimated the black sailors' barracks. Flying glass cut the men as the windows blew out. One sailor jumped out of his bunk following the first explosion looking at the flashes of light in the sky. Flying glass hit him in the face and eyes, eventually blinding him completely. Port Chicago accounted for more than fifteen percent of black naval casualties in the war. The explosion killed everyone on the pier and aboard the two ships instantly.<sup>147</sup>

Another man recalled sitting on the latrine reading a letter from home when the blast knocked him into the wall. "Men were screaming, the lights went out and glass was flying all over the place . . . the first thing that came to my mind, I said, 'Jesus Christ, the Japs have hit!'"<sup>148</sup> The incident left the men anxious as they rebuilt the base.<sup>149</sup> In the aftermath, fifty African American sailors refused to continue unloading ammunition from ships, afraid for their

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<sup>146</sup> Carl Tuggle, interview by John Bryant, Carl Tuggle Collection (AFC/2001/001/49547), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>147</sup> Robert L. Allen, *The Port Chicago Mutiny: The Story of the Largest Mass Mutiny Trial in U.S. Naval History* (Berkeley, CA: Heyday Books, 1993), 58-59, 64.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

lives. The Navy convicted them of mutiny in a court-martial and sentenced them to hard labor and prison. The NAACP with counsel Thurgood Marshall and the black press intervened, however, and the service returned the men to duty.<sup>150</sup> The mounting pressures of racism and misuse had led African American sailors to rebel in fear for their own safety.

African Americans in the Air Corps experienced similar pressures, and there too, tensions eventually escalated into violence and protest. The Air Corps established its “experimental” black pilot program at Tuskegee, Alabama, over the vigorous protests of white citizens in the area. White residents petitioned their representatives to stop the establishment of the African American aviation camp, arguing that it would “destroy the usefulness” of that section of the city and prevent further white expansion on the east side of town.<sup>151</sup> The Air Corps later determined, however, that stationing black airmen at installations without a sizeable black population proved problematic as well. Bangor Maine, home to Dow Field, lacked a substantial black population—just over two hundred African Americans resided in a city of thirty-thousand. This meant the black 38<sup>th</sup> Aviation Squadron at Dow Field had no facilities for recreation, entertainment, or other social activities. White residents made it clear that they did not desire African American patronage, and that they resented the black presence in their midst.<sup>152</sup>

In spite of white fears over the presence of black airmen, the Air Corps went forward with the pilot program at Tuskegee. On July 19, 1941, eleven African American Civilian Pilot Training Program graduates and one black Army officer began their military aviation training.

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<sup>150</sup> Nalty, *Strength for the Fight*, 195.

<sup>151</sup> “Petition to the Hons. John H. Bankhead and Lister Hill, Senators Tuskegee, Alabama” 21 Apr 1941, folder 2 Tuskegee Miscellaneous, box 1827, entry 295; Project Files Air Fields, 1932-1942, Tuskegee Army Air Field; Records of the Army Air Forces, RG 18; NACP.

<sup>152</sup> Memo, J.E. Chaney, Major General U.S. Army, “Stationing of Colored Troops in Localities Lacking a Sizeable Colored Population,” to Commanding General, Army Air Forces, 20 Nov 1942, folder 1, box 103, entry 294a; Security Classified Correspondence (NND 730061), Central Decimal File 291.2; Records of the Army Air Forces, RG 18; NACP.

Black enlisted men commenced training shortly after the first ground crew for the 99<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadron arrived at the unfinished Tuskegee Army Airfield in October of that year. At the start of the experiment the Air Corps only established one black squadron—the 99<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadron. The 99<sup>th</sup> absorbed all the graduates of the Tuskegee program until the unit moved overseas later in the war, and the Army Air Corps eventually created the 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter group to absorb other squadrons from the men emerging from Tuskegee.

The Air Corps faced a number of difficulties running the training program at Tuskegee. A complicated command structure, caused by a number of overlapping commands—the Eastern Training Command, the First Air Force, and the Army Air Force Headquarters—triggered a number of issues. The groups lacked coordination, making it difficult for Maxwell Air Force Base, Tuskegee’s immediate Headquarters, to carry out a number of necessary administrative procedures like promotions or assignments.<sup>153</sup> The Air Corps also initially placed all basic flight training for African Americans at Tuskegee to maintain segregation, causing severe overcrowding. With a cluttered Air Corps bureaucracy and many commanders unwilling to have a black unit in their command, the 99<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadron did not deploy until 1943. Black flying units contained signal officers, quartermaster officers, and graduates from the integrated Miami Beach OCS.

The base lacked adequate facilities to accommodate the men stationed there.<sup>154</sup> Benjamin O. Davis, Sr. the only black general and an assistant at the Office of the Inspector General, observed that many of the troops at Tuskegee lived in tents, and that the Air Corps did not provide sufficient facilities for the families of the military and civilian personnel connected with

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<sup>153</sup> Osur, *Blacks in the Army Air Forces*, 43.

<sup>154</sup> Osur, *Blacks in the Army Air Forces*, 41. Stanley Sandler, *Segregated Skies: All-Black Combat Squadrons of World War II* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992) 32.

the base.<sup>155</sup> A trainee noted much the same when he first arrived at Tuskegee, dismayed that the men would have to live in tents.<sup>156</sup> When the men of the 99<sup>th</sup> began to arrive, the Air Corps had yet to complete construction on the base. Even General Davis' son., then a regular army captain, and commanding officer of the squadron, lived in a tent. Davis Jr. recalled that the men trained on P-40s in subpar condition—planes used by the Flying Tigers (the American volunteer group in the Chinese Air Force) still containing dirty green camouflage paint on oily fuselages, each a slightly different model, but every one leaking oil. The planes' appearance and condition did not encourage the new recruits.<sup>157</sup>

The amount of time that elapsed between receiving acceptance notices and orders to report to Tuskegee added to the frustration. With only one African-American flight squadron and base, acceptance to the pilot program did always correlate with slots at Tuskegee. In addition, as men waited for their orders to report to Tuskegee, they risked being drafted by local draft boards.<sup>158</sup> A group accepted for pilot training on September 15, 1942, was “tentatively scheduled” to begin training April 15 of the next year.<sup>159</sup>

Practices at Tuskegee Army Air Force Base cause low morale as well. Colonel Frederick von Kimble took command of Tuskegee in early 1942. Although von Kimble hailed from

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<sup>155</sup> Report, Brigadier General B.O. Davis, U.S. Army, to Inspector General, “Special Inspection, Air Corps Advanced Flying School, Tuskegee, Ala,” 18-21 Apr 1942, folder 1, box 1827, entry 295; Project Files Air Fields, 1932-1942, Tuskegee Army Air Field; Records of the Army Air Forces, RG 18; NACP.

<sup>156</sup> Robert Pitts, interview by Mary Penick Motley, *The Invisible Soldier*, 202.

<sup>157</sup> Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., *Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., American* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 88.

<sup>158</sup> Sandler, *Segregated Skies*, 33.

<sup>159</sup> Letter, Edward Laird to David C. Hale, Captain, Air Corps, Assistant Chief Aviation Cadet section, 19 Sept 1942. Response, Philip M. Brett, Jr. Assistant Chief, Aviation Cadet Section, to Edward Laird, 25 Sept 1942, folder 5, box 1826, entry 295; Project Files Air Fields, 1932-1942, Tuskegee Army Air Field; Records of the Army Air Forces, RG 18; NACP.

Oregon, he was a strict segregationist and a martinet. He allegedly asserted that no African American would rise to the rank of captain while he was in charge.<sup>160</sup> Von Kimble also emphasized the importance of maintaining segregation in bases throughout the country to ensure uniform segregation regulations at different posts.<sup>161</sup> Upon his arrival to Tuskegee, provoked by the entrance of two black airmen into the white section of the Post Exchange, von Kimble redecorated the base with “colored” and “white” signs.<sup>162</sup> With morale at an all-time low, the Air Corps soon transferred von Kimble and replaced him with Colonel Noel Parrish.

The commanding officer’s attitudes informed the surrounding civilian community, and von Kimble’s tenure as commanding officer did not make the already hostile Tuskegee community any more receptive to the presence of black troops in their midst. General Davis reported that enlisted personnel demonstrated particular resentment of the strict racial off-reservation regulations.<sup>163</sup> One enlisted man recalled that to go to a movie, a group of men piled into the back of a truck. When they reached the theater they designated one man to take the money to buy tickets—a large group of black men at the ticket box would appear too threatening. The men then filed to the side of the building and proceeded up a set of stairs to sit in the balcony, where they remained until the white crowd downstairs cleared out. The airman remembered following other forms of southern etiquette near Tuskegee—approaching a white

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<sup>160</sup> Sandler, *Segregated Skies*, 34.

<sup>161</sup> Osur, *Blacks in the Army Air Force*, 44.

<sup>162</sup> Sandler, *Segregated Skies*, 34.

<sup>163</sup> Report, Brigadier General B.O. Davis to Inspector General, “Special Inspection, Air Corps Advanced Flying School, Tuskegee, Ala,” 6 May 1942, folder 1, box 1827, entry 295; Project Files Air Fields, 1932-1942, Tuskegee Army Air Field; Records of the Army Air Forces, RG 18; NACP.

person on the street then stepping off the sidewalk to let him or her pass.<sup>164</sup> Later, Colonel Parish set a more liberal tone and had more success soothing racial tensions between white southerners and the African-American troops. During his command, relations between civilians and base personnel improved, and he reduced segregation on the base itself.<sup>165</sup>

Yet African-American troops encountered hostility at other airfields around the country, in many cases even more so than at all-black Tuskegee. Racial disturbances abounded throughout 1942 and 1943. Like Tuskegee, airfields in the South experienced the most problems, though racial tensions and incidents were certainly not limited to the region. Complaints and reports of discrimination and even brutality poured into the War Department and organizations like the NAACP from around the country. A riot nearly erupted at Lake Charles, Louisiana in the African-American section of the base. When a black private climbed atop a cab to address a crowd of black airmen, ignoring a direct order from a commissioned officer to get down, a pair of white enlisted men forcibly removed him, and the situation nearly escalated.<sup>166</sup> African-American troops at Grenier Field, New Hampshire had to travel sixty miles to Boston for any recreation.<sup>167</sup> In Utah, a group of black airmen decided to take a trip to Salt Lake City. Hungry, they looked for a restaurant, but as one airman reported, “the only place that would accept colored was a Japanese restaurant. When we tried later to get some beer, we could find no place to serve us except a German tavern. The boys then began to wonder why they were

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<sup>164</sup>Dr. Cyril O. Byron, 99<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadron and 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group, interview by Sarah Barksdale, 16 Mar 2012, Baltimore, Maryland.

<sup>165</sup> Osur, *Blacks in the Army Air Force*, 45.

<sup>166</sup> Report, William T. Dinning, Adjutant General, to Commanding Officer, 75<sup>th</sup> Aviation Squadron, Lake Charles Louisiana, 13 May 1943, folder 3, box 103, entry 294a; entry 294a; Security Classified Correspondence (NND 730061), Central Decimal File 291.2; Records of the Army Air Forces, RG 18; NACP.

<sup>167</sup> Memo, Major General Virgil L. Peterson to Deputy Chief of Staff, “Facilities for Negro Troops, Grenier Field, New Hampshire,” 19 May 1943, folder 2, box 103, entry 294a; entry 294a; Security Classified Correspondence (NND 730061), Central Decimal File 291.2; Records of the Army Air Forces, RG 18; NACP.

fighting the Germans and Japs when they were the only ones who acted decently toward them.”<sup>168</sup> Near Dyersburg Air Force Base Tennessee in December 1943, a black private and a white sheriff exchanged gunshots. When the sheriff closed down Dyersburg taverns, Private Joseph Burrell and some other intoxicated friends disarmed a night marshal. The sheriff panicked and opened fire, which Burrell returned, resulting in Burrell’s death and a gunshot wound to the sheriff.<sup>169</sup>

After a dispute outside of Robbins Field in Perry, Georgia, Private William Smith landed in the Macon County jail, and civilian authorities refused to release him into military custody. When Smith accidentally bumped a white female customer at a grocery store, an altercation with several white men ensued. Sharp words passed between the men, and when the incident escalated, the civilian police took Smith into custody and jailed him to protect him from the wrath of a white mob intent upon lynching him.<sup>170</sup> With each report of discrimination, the War Department conducted an investigation and generally came to similar conclusions: investigations verified that the Army Air Forces possessed sufficient segregated facilities (or if not there was no solution); found no evidence of maltreatment, and appropriate action should be taken against instigators and troublemakers. Occasionally the War Department recommended

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<sup>168</sup> Report, Lt. Robert V. Craver, “Summary of Racial Situation,” 29 Nov 1943, folder 1, box 104, entry 294a; Security Classified Correspondence (NND 730061), Central Decimal File 291.2; Records of the Army Air Forces, RG 18; NACP.

<sup>169</sup> Report, Colonel Max F. Schneider to Commanding General, “Disciplinary Control of Negro Troops at Dyersburg Army Air Base,” 27 Jan 1944, folder 2, box 104, entry 294a; Security Classified Correspondence (NND 730061), Central Decimal File 291.2; Records of the Army Air Forces, RG 18; NACP.

<sup>170</sup> Letter, Personnel Section 4905<sup>th</sup> AAF Base Unit to Executive Secretary, NAACP, 24 Aug 1944; Letter, Administrative Assistant NAACP to Mr. A.T. Waldon, Attorney at Law, 21 Sept 1944; Letter John Martyn, Administrative Assistant War Department to Mr. Grant Reynolds, Administrative Assistant, NAACP, 8 Sept 1944; Letter, Cpl Tyrone Y. Sexton 4905 AAF Base Unit to Grant Reynolds, 7 Sept 1944, folder 8 Camp Investigations “R, S” 1942-1946, box II:G2; Part II Veterans Affairs File, 1940-1950; MS 34140 Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C

some slight remedial actions. Though encounters and conflicts in the North were less incendiary than those in the South, racism demoralized black troops and left them little recourse. Tensions escalated in 1943 and 1944, leaving black airmen incensed.

The War Department's failure to move the 99<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadron out of training and into combat galled Civilian Aide to the Secretary of War William H. Hastie. In early 1943, frustrated with the lack of response and progress from the Army Air Forces, Judge Hastie resigned his post in protest. He had attempted to implement smaller forms of integration such as assigning small units of African Americans to larger white units (an experiment later implemented by the Army following the Battle of the Bulge). He also repeatedly suggested breaking down segregation to get some semblance of equality for black troops. At Tuskegee, he complained to Army Air Forces Commanding General Hap Arnold that the Air Forces were not bringing in black officers to replace white officers as originally planned.<sup>171</sup>

In December 1942 when the Army announced it would establish a segregated OCS at Jefferson Barracks, Missouri, Hastie saw no alternative but to resign in protest, effective 31 January 1943. Although he had found the military's handling of racial issues unsatisfactory from the outset, Hastie declared that this sort of "retrogression" made it impossible to continue. He argued that the War Department allowed public opinion to dictate its handling of racial incidents, and that American public opinion often mirrored southern racism.<sup>172</sup> The War Department refuted Hastie's charges, but his actions prompted the Army Air Forces to relent and begin preparations to send the 99<sup>th</sup> overseas to North Africa. In March 1943 the War Department also

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<sup>171</sup> Memo, William H. Hastie to Lt. General H.H. Arnold, CG, AAF, 19 July 1942, folder 3, box 1826, entry 295; Project Files Air Fields, 1932-1942, Tuskegee Army Air Field; Records of the Army Air Forces, RG 18; NACP.

<sup>172</sup> Memo, Colonel John H. McCormick, Deputy Asst. Chief of Air Staff, to Chief of Air Staff, 9 Jan 1943; Memo, William H. Hastie to the Secretary of War, 5 Jan 1943, folder 1, box 103, entry 294a; Security Classified Correspondence (NND 730061), Central Decimal File 291.2; Records of the Army Air Forces, RG 18; NACP. Memo includes a copy of Hastie's resignation

passed a directive forbidding the armed forces from assigning any recreational facilities on the basis of race, including theaters and post exchanges. The next year the War Department also issued a pamphlet on the *Command of Negro Troops* intended to foster greater responsibility among white commanders.<sup>173</sup>

The frequent racial clashes at air fields coupled with Hastie's resignation demonstrated growing African American frustrations. Although the 99<sup>th</sup> deployed in spring 1943, the discrimination continued, and the all-black bomber unit, the 477<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group, remained stateside for the entirety of the war. In April 1945 Lieutenant Lester Norris wrote to his family that the 477<sup>th</sup> had arrived at Freeman Field, Indiana the day before, and were already in trouble. Norris instructed his family to send a telegram to the senator from Maryland, saying, "My son is one of the 80 officers now under arrest at Freeman Field, Indiana on racial discriminatory charges and we, his parents, demand a Congressional investigation in this matter immediately."<sup>174</sup>

Relocated to Freeman Field in early March 1945, the 477<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group had moved forty times within the past year. Colonel Noel Parrish of Tuskegee had described the 477<sup>th</sup>'s commanding officer, Colonel Robert Selway, as openly hostile toward African-American pilots, especially the establishment of an all-black bomber group.<sup>175</sup> The first and only black bomber group, the 477<sup>th</sup> formed in June 1943. It underwent a lengthy training period, and the Army Air Forces found this group of pilots unwilling to passively endure segregation and racism. Branded as trouble-makers, the 477<sup>th</sup> never saw combat.

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<sup>173</sup> Morris J. MacGregor, *Integration of the Armed Forces*, 44-45.

<sup>174</sup> Letter, Lt. Lester Norris to "Folks," not dated, folder 10, box II:G1, Part II Veterans Affairs File, 1940-1950; MS 34140 Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>175</sup> Sandler, *Segregated Skies*, 121.

Determined to maintain segregation, Colonel Selway circumvented the March 1943 War Department directive prohibiting segregated recreational facilities. He separated troops by unit rather than color, designating certain buildings for the 477<sup>th</sup> personnel (black) and others for supervisory personnel (white).<sup>176</sup> Another Army regulation, however, ensured club membership privileges to all officers. Again, Selway slipped around this provision by claiming that, as Freeman Field was a training post, he could provide separate buildings for trainees and supervisory personnel. Yet Selway had overlooked the group's history of protesting discrimination at previous posts—the unit had no intention of heeding his regulations. Only hours after the unit's arrival at Freeman Field on April 5, 1945, a number of new officers attempted to enter the club that Selway had designated for supervisory personnel. They entered in small groups, some forcing their way inside. One African-American lieutenant asked to be served at the bar, and the bartender responded that Selway had instructed them not to serve black officers.<sup>177</sup> Club staff informed the men that if they did not leave, they would be arrested. That day, MPs arrested thirty-six black officers. The next day, the total increased to sixty, and Colonel Selway shut down the club.

As one of the officers, Lieutenant Frank Pivalo, complained in a letter to the Inspector General the next day, Selway's order directly violated the War Department policy prohibiting racial discrimination. The colonel's denial of officer's privileges to the black trainees made it difficult for the men to maintain morale, continued Pivalo. Furthermore, Selway's actions seemed calculated to lower black officer's prestige in the eyes of other officers, enlisted

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<sup>176</sup> NAACP, ““Report of Investigation of Freeman Field, Indiana, (477<sup>th</sup> Medium Bomb Group) April 13-14, 1945,” 16 Apr 1945, folder 10, box II:G1; Part II Veterans Affairs File, 1940-1950; MS 34140 Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

personnel, and civilians; on behalf of the 477<sup>th</sup>, he requested that immediate action be taken lest this type of circumstance thrive and spread.<sup>178</sup>

In the following days the Army Air Forces dropped charges against all but three of the black officers, who were detained because they used force to enter the club. Charges against the rest were dismissed as the Air Force judge advocate advised. But Selway then issued Base Regulation 85-2, stating that the base could maintain different standards for personnel undergoing training than permanent base personnel. The regulation authorized separate mess, housing, and recreational facilities. Selway instituted the regulation with the General Frank O'Driscoll Hunter's (Commanding General of the First Air Force) full support. Commanding officers summoned the men to sign the regulation to indicate that they understood, but one hundred and one men of the 477<sup>th</sup> refused to sign. Superior officers read them the 64<sup>th</sup> Article of War and issued a direct order to sign the document. Aware that willfully disobeying a direct order in wartime could result in death, the black airmen held fast in their refusal and were subsequently placed under arrest and moved to Godman Field, Kentucky.<sup>179</sup>

The event created considerable political turmoil. Almost immediately, the NAACP began collaborating with the 477<sup>th</sup>, and NAACP administrative assistant Leslie Perry visited the airfield during the uproar and spoke with the men. He reported their dissatisfaction with opportunities for promotion, the shortage of black officers, and a lack of experience among

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<sup>178</sup> Memo, Frank Pivalo to Inspector General, "Violation of Army Regulations, War Department Policies of Racial Discriminatory Practices against Army Officers," 6 Apr 1945, folder 1/6 Letters by Frank Pivalo Protesting Racial Discrimination of Freeman Sept 1944-Aug 1945, Tuskegee Airmen Trainees—Freeman Field Incident, SCM 03-25, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (SCRBC), The New York Public Library (NYPL).

<sup>179</sup> Memo, Frank Pivalo to the Inspector General, "Racial Discrimination at Selman Field, La.," 24 Aug 1945, Tuskegee Airmen Trainees—Freeman Field Incident, SCM 03-25, Folder 1/6 Letters by Frank Pivalo Protesting Racial Discrimination of Freeman Sept 1944-Aug 1945, Tuskegee Airmen Trainees—Freeman Field Incident, SCRBC, NYPL.

senior white officers. Perry also inferred in his report, after interviewing Colonel Selway, that it seemed likely that General Hunter acted as the precipitating force behind Base Regulation 85-2. Perry maintained that Selway seemed very concerned with his career and making rank, and too clever to stick out his neck over an incendiary issue likely to draw national attention.<sup>180</sup> Indeed, Selway insisted that he had issued no orders based on racial segregation.<sup>181</sup>

Members of the 477<sup>th</sup> staged a publicity campaign, writing letters to civil rights organizations and directing friends and families to spread word of the incident.<sup>182</sup> One black officer wrote to his brother who forwarded the letter to the *Chicago Defender*. The officer explained that he had been arrested twice that week, once for going into the white officer's club, and again for refusing to sign a regulation promoting segregation. "The charges again are rather in the dark," he wrote. "Evidently the war is secondary to putting us in 'our places.'" <sup>183</sup> The Air Forces tried the three officers who forced their way into the club in July, 1945. As the men worked in a maintenance unit that kept the base in operating order, they were not actually trainees and the Air Forces released them with a mild reprimand.<sup>184</sup>

In the aftermath of the Freeman Field mutiny, General Arnold replaced Colonel Selway with Colonel B.O. Davis, Jr. at the request of the NAACP and 477<sup>th</sup> officers. Davis had

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<sup>180</sup> NAACP, "Report of Investigation of Freeman Field, Indiana, (477<sup>th</sup> Medium Bomb Group) April 13-14, 1945," 16 Apr 1945, folder 10, box II:G1; Part II Veterans Affairs File, 1940-1950; MS 34140 Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C

<sup>181</sup> Testimony of Col. Robert R. Selway, Jr., re Discrimination of African American Officers at Freeman Field, 16 Apr 1945, folder 1/3, Tuskegee Airmen Trainees—Freeman Field Incident, SCRBC, NYPL.

<sup>182</sup> Letter 477<sup>th</sup> to NAACP Dayton Ohio, 10 Apr 1945, folder 10, box II:G1; Part II Veterans Affairs File, 1940-1950; MS 34140 Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C

<sup>183</sup> "Soldier tells of Arrest of Airmen," *The Chicago Defender (National edition)*; May 12, 1945; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975) p. 12.

<sup>184</sup> Nalty, *Strength for the Fight*, 160.

commanded the 332<sup>nd</sup> in combat over Europe. The war ended before the 477<sup>th</sup> could move overseas to the Pacific, but over a hundred officers had openly defied a direct order in wartime and received little more than a slap on the wrist. With this incident, the bombardment group set a precedent for later forms of peaceful organized protest and highlighted the lack of opportunities for blacks in the service and the system of segregation in the armed forces.<sup>185</sup> In addition to the precedents that Freeman Field set, the confrontation and those like it generated more questions for African-American troops about identity. If the initial struggle to be included in the mobilization demonstrated a striving toward Americanness, the black experience upon entering the military led to self-questioning, uncertainty, anger, and backlash. On top of grueling physical training, the men endured the psychological assault of segregation and racism; the riots that erupted in mid-1943 and after were almost a natural result, and toward the end of the war culminated in an organized backlash by the men at Freeman Field.

The black community in the United States recognized these injustices and individuals and organizations spoke out about them throughout the war. In his 1940 work *Native Son*, Richard Wright wrote about a young black man in 1930s Chicago. The protagonist, Bigger Thomas, killed the white daughter of his employers and his own girlfriend, a young black woman. Wright described Thomas as the product of a dislocated society: an emotional state full of tension, fear, a sense of impatience and exclusion, and an ache for violent action.<sup>186</sup> Bigger Thomas held a dual identity: an African American because he was a native son, and a black nationalist because white Americans did not permit him to exist as an American. He hovered unwanted between two worlds; “The most that I could say of Bigger was that he felt the *need* for a whole life and

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<sup>185</sup> Sandler, *Segregated Skies*, 128.

<sup>186</sup> Richard Wright, “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born,” in *Native Son* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 1940, 2005), 447.

acted out of that need; that was all.”<sup>187</sup> Wright demonstrated what this oppression did to Thomas’ relationships with blacks and whites. Thomas resented whites; he was sullen, angry, ignorant, emotionally unstable, and depressed. Nor did he connect to African Americans, but appeared split off from other black people. In one scene Bigger harassed a black male friend, bullying and threatening the young man with a knife and physical violence. He proceeded to humiliate and hurt his friend, then alienated other black male friends in the process.<sup>188</sup> Wright showed how oppression seemed to “hinder and stifle in the victim the very qualities of character which are so essential for an effective struggle against the oppressor.”<sup>189</sup>

Bigger Thomas embodied the American dilemma. Wright removed morality from the character and his actions, and revealed an unchecked brutality that emerged because of oppression—a deep seated hatred within the American psyche. As Wright wrote, Bigger felt the need for a whole life and he acted out of his need. “What I killed for, I am,” reflected Bigger. Though Bigger killed accidentally, with the act he felt free for the first time. “I was doing something,” explained Bigger. The murders gave his actions consequence. He mattered, and his actions mattered.<sup>190</sup>

Black troops in World War II were not Bigger Thomas, described as one of the most despicable protagonists in literature. Bigger embodied America, and the violent actions he took represented nascent form of consciousness or a striving toward that consciousness. Bigger described white people: “Well, they own everything. They choke you off the face of the earth. . . They don’t even let you feel what you want to feel. They after you so hot and hard you can

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<sup>187</sup> Ibid, 451.

<sup>188</sup> Wright, *Native Son*, 37-41.

<sup>189</sup> Wright, “How Bigger Was Born,” 453.

<sup>190</sup> Wright, *Native Son*, 429, 354.

only feel what they doing to you. They kill you before you die.”<sup>191</sup> Bigger’s lawyer asked him to expand on this—what had Bigger wanted to do but felt he could not? Once, said Bigger, he wanted to be an aviator. They did not allow blacks into the training school. Once he wanted to be in the Army; but “it’s a Jim Crow army. All they want a black man for is to dig ditches. And in the navy, all I can do is wash dishes and scrub floors.”<sup>192</sup>

In 1943 African-American troops lashed out in a different way. They did not engage in violence like that of Bigger Thomas. Yet the anger they felt and the isolation imposed upon these black troops resulted in violence. Tired of discrimination, social regulations, meanness, and indifference, black troops retaliated. When white America lynched black soldiers in uniform, when the War Department set them to hard labor rather than allowing them to perform their designated combat duties, society emasculated and infantilized the African-American troops. In addition, when those in power prevented African Americans from fighting, keeping them in training camps rather than sending them overseas, it negated African-American citizenship and their identity as Americans—belittling, patronizing, and dehumanizing them. When the War Department declared repeatedly that black men needed strong white leadership because blacks could not perform on their own, or argued that African Americans could not provide this type of leadership themselves, it tore into the psyche. As Wright wrote, the relationship between blacks and whites in America, both North and South, was a “relationship whose effects are carried by every Negro, like scars, somewhere in his body and mind.”<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid, 353.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> Wright, “How Bigger was Born,” 452.

Men in units like the 364<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment at Camp Van Dorn retaliated with raucous violence. Furious with the mistreatment, they wanted their voices heard and to hurt those who caused them to suffer. Other units reacted with less open belligerence. The ill-treatment by commanding officers made the men of the 477<sup>th</sup> irate. Each refusal to play by white rules demonstrated their building anger and ability to act upon it. The men in the bombardment group also possessed more formal education, and they worked through questions of identity and established their voices in a more complex way than many other groups. Yet the reports of brutality against black troops in the South, military police beating black men, officers using other forms of brutality all hearkened back to DuBois' question of half a century before: "What, after all, am I? Am I an American or am I a Negro?"<sup>194</sup> As African-American troops echoed periodically, "We are clearly not wanted, so why are we here?"<sup>195</sup> In this turbulent period, African-American troops struggled to find themselves; to push back against forces attempting to smother them, taking their spirits and their voices and killing them before they died.

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<sup>194</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Conservation of Races" 1898 in *W.E.B. Du Bois: Writings*, 821.

<sup>195</sup> Letter Pfc. Dorothy Bray to the War Department, 4 Oct 1944, folder 5, box II:G1; Part II Veterans Affairs File, 1940-1950; MS 34140 Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Chapter 2  
A Jim-Crow Reeducation: African-American Troops in Europe

7 May 1944 (Somewhere in England)

These people impress me of possessing a certain amount of steadfastness as reflected in their warm hospitality when you are invited to their homes. They come out to meet you in the majority of cases. A custom, no doubt so long continued until it can be noticed even in the youngest. I suppose they live by a system of the “Traditional School”, treating every man as a man irregardless to color or creed, a thing worth fighting for. If only that could be true when we all return to our native land.<sup>1</sup>

In May 1944 Staff Sergeant Frederic Clanagan wrote to the dean of Howard University, his alma mater, describing some of his experiences abroad. Part of a service unit in the European Theater of Operations, Clanagan traveled to England, France, and Belgium. In his letters he detailed his experiences in each country: the English hospitality and the joyous liberation of France. Each “had their hardships as well as many grand experiences, some of which I shall never forget.” He described it as “a world of valuable knowledge.”<sup>2</sup> Many black troops, like Clanagan, acquired new worldviews and perspectives in their time abroad. They tasted, as General Colin Powell later described it, a “breath of freedom.”<sup>3</sup> Their experiences in the European and Mediterranean Theaters introduced the men to a different world. In 1919 W.E.B.

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<sup>1</sup> Letter, Frederic F. Clanagan to Mr. Nabrit. 7 May 1944, Collection of Letters from Howard University Men and Women in the Armed Forces, 1941-1946, Collection 122-1 to 122-3, box A-I 122-1, folder: Clanagan, Frederic F.—1944 (typescript); Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>2</sup> Letter Frederic F. Clanagan to President Johnson, 17 Jan 1945, Collection of Letters from Howard University Men and Women in the Armed Forces, 1941-1946, box A-I 122-1, folder: Clanagan, Frederic F.—1944 (typescript); Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Maria Höhn and Martin Klimke, *A Breath of Freedom: The Civil Rights Struggle, African-American GIs and Germany* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 83.

Du Bois wrote about the experiences of black soldiers in France during the First World War. African-American troops faced “deliberate and devilish persecution from their own countrymen,” wrote Du Bois, as white American soldiers belittled and tormented them at every turn. Yet they also had “a taste of real democracy and world-old culture” that was revolutionizing. When their own countrymen discriminated against them while white Europeans welcomed the black troops into their homes, it increased their determination “never to give up the fight for Negro equality in America. . . . A new, radical, Negro spirit has been born in France,” wrote Du Bois.

On a larger scale, black troops experienced much the same in World War II. As the United States waged war in Europe, African-American troops moved overseas in considerable numbers. First, they had to overcome certain bureaucratic hurdles associated with sending African Americans abroad: coordinating with foreign governments hesitant to have black troops in their midst. Black service troops began moving overseas in 1942, and combat troops followed in 1943-1944 though with considerably more resistance to their placement in the European Theater. The U.S. seemed reluctant to place black troops into combat. As they moved overseas in increasing numbers, black servicemen frequently found European civilians receptive to their presence. During and after the war, black troops in the European Theater also developed relationships with white European women, something forbidden to black men in the United States. These social interactions led to some interracial marriages and mixed-race children, which American institutions did everything to prohibit.

Some of the men overseas experienced combat or fought to be included in combat duty. The bureaucratic struggles they faced as others sought to deny that duty illustrated the tensions between the idea of black military service and citizenship. For those who did experience combat

overseas, it momentarily leveled the playing field and made them equal to white American troops. This experience contrasted sharply with their relationships with white servicemen off of the battlefield, often fraught with tension. Each of these interactions, social and physical, American and non-American, worked to disrupt the social constructions of race that African Americans understood. These interactions altered their consciousness and dismantled the “Jim Crow education” they had received their entire lives in the U.S., demonstrating to them that a broader realm of possible exchanges and lifestyles existed.<sup>4</sup> Just as Du Bois pointed out that, to demand better, one must have a conception of what “better” entailed, the experiences in Europe presented some black troops with new options.

Their experiences in Europe mirrored some of those in the Pacific. Those similar encounters with white American servicemen demonstrated to African-American troops that they could challenge the racial hierarchy, though in a different and more complicated way in the Pacific. The limited numbers of black troops in combat had some similar realizations as well, and many received inadequate opportunities to carry out these duties. Yet in many respects, these locations provided substantially different experiences. The United States waged different wars in these environments. As historian John Dower pointed out, the Pacific War possessed a distinctly racial nature. Because the wars possessed different characteristics, so too did black troops’ interactions with white American servicemen, native civilians and enemy combatants. Perhaps one of the most distinctive characteristics of the European theater, was that General Dwight D. Eisenhower’s headquarters developed a defined racial policy to decrease tensions between black and white troops. Other theaters often had vague racial policies and left

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Wright, “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow, an Autobiographical Sketch” 1937 in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 1389.

implementation of these policies to secondary commands. Eisenhower's headquarters issued a directive in 1942 instructing commanding officers to avoid discrimination, and recognize the "practical impossibility" of enforcing segregation in European societies.<sup>5</sup> Major General John C.H. Lee, head of the Services of Supply in Europe, enforced this directive throughout the war.<sup>6</sup> This did not indicate a lack of racial tension in Europe, quite to the contrary. Rather, the considerable racial tension in Europe paled in comparison to the intense outbreaks in other areas of the world. In Europe, black troops interacted primarily with white European civilians, and these interactions reframed their notions of appropriate and possible black and white relations. The racial order in the Pacific War introduced additional complications. This chapter begins with that experience in Europe, and the next offers a contrast with a depiction of African-Americans' Pacific War. Each experience changed the men considerably, though at times imparted those new worldviews in different methods.

Before the men reached Europe they had to overcome a number of bureaucratic hurdles. Many legislators, white citizens, and military officials had reservations about sending black troops abroad. Consequently, African-American troops often remained in training long after comparable white units deployed. The servicemen, reformers, and legislators all fought to compel the military to send African-American combat troops overseas. Even so, many combat units still performed peripheral duties overseas. The black service units also deployed slowly throughout 1942 and 1943. In the spring of 1942, General George C. Marshall called the War Department from London and ordered the department not to send black troops to the British Isles. General Dwight D. Eisenhower corrected this the following week, describing the

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Ulysses Lee, *The Employment of Negro Troops* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 1966), 623-624.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

communication as an administrative blunder sent without Marshall's authority. African-American soldiers began arriving in Britain soon thereafter in May 1942. Their numbers in Britain increased rapidly, and by the end of 1942 the Army anticipated some 12,000 black service troops were in the country.<sup>7</sup> The Army stationed the majority of them in the heavily populated midlands of England. In July 1942 Eisenhower issued a policy statement ordering headquarters to avoid discrimination: where segregation was not possible, black troops should receive the same accommodations as white troops; minimizing friction between black and white soldiers should be a priority. The determination that Generals Eisenhower and John C.H. Lee, exhibited in eliminating internal dissent in the American ranks to improve Anglo-American relations filtered down into the lower commands. In one quartermaster regiment in Northern Ireland, black and white noncommissioned officers from different units formed committees to discuss rules and race relations.<sup>8</sup> Another black soldier in England recalled the officers getting together for a meeting in an open field in Bristol, discussing interracial relations.<sup>9</sup>

The presence of black troops also caused considerable anxiety for the British government. As one British official observed, American culture differed significantly from their own. From the British perspective, American wealth, boastfulness, relations with British women, and racial segregation could make cooperation difficult. On the other side, many African-American newspapers viewed Great Britain with suspicion because of its colonial

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<sup>7</sup> Graham Smith, *When Jim Crow Met John Bull: Black American Soldiers in World War II Britain* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd Publishers, 1987), 38-43.

<sup>8</sup> Lee, *The Employment of Negro Troops*, 624.

<sup>9</sup> Wilbur Young, interview by L.D. Reddick, 9 Aug 1946, folder 1/13 1946 Reddick Interviews with Servicemen Ti-Z, Lawrence D. Reddick World War II Project, MG 490, SCM 98-19, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (SCRBC), The New York Public Library (NYPL).

legacy.<sup>10</sup> Both British and American authorities tread carefully to avoid giving offense. The British government, uncomfortable with the black presence and importation of American racial customs, wrestled with different solutions. At one point British officials suggested that Americans cease sending black troops altogether, arguing that the Americans behaved scandalously by exporting their internal problems. The British agreed that nobody wanted to see lynchings in England, and the American racial problem blemished American society and belied their professed liberal ideals.<sup>11</sup> After a period of inaction, the British cabinet met to deal with the racial issue. While it agreed that adopting American customs would be extreme, it suggested that contact between black troops and the British people should be limited. The cabinet decided that it would not interfere with American arrangements for segregation, but that it was not British policy to discriminate. As Americans built segregated camps, however, the British readily assisted them and ensured that buildings with white British civilians did not house black American troops. They also organized recreational clubs with strict rules.<sup>12</sup>

The British government worked to educate their troops about American racial customs. Memos and correspondence from British authorities depicted the historical context of the American racial problem as the British understood it. In one educational memo, the British Secretary of State's office noted that "the Americans are making a great experiment in working out a democratic way of life in a mixed community, with races of very different characteristics and traditions. . . . It is a difficult task and it is not for us to embarrass them, even if we have different views on how race relationships should be treated in our own country and in the Empire." British officials advised their servicemen and women to avoid offending the

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<sup>10</sup> Graham Smith, *When Jim Crow Met John Bull* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 1987), 42-43, 31.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 45-48.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 76, 84.

Americans. While they should “be friendly and sympathetic towards coloured American Troops,” they should avoid situations with black and white Americans together. “Make it your business to avoid unpleasantness,” they suggested. White women with black Americans could also cause controversy, cautioned British authorities.<sup>13</sup>

Legitimizing the British fears, American troops clashed repeatedly with one another in Great Britain. “You wouldn’t believe the lies they have told everybody about us,” wrote one black soldier. “They try to keep us out of all the pubs, and when they can’t they fight us.”<sup>14</sup> A shocked British club owner wrote a neighboring unit about incidents between black and white American soldiers. “I went on a Wednesday to the 3<sup>rd</sup>. inst. to a dance hall (public) at Covent Garden with a coloured gentleman of the Medical Profession and his wife, when suddenly three American soldiers walked to him in the Middle of the floor and told him to ‘Get Out’. . . . There has been any amount of complaint about American Troops telling coloured soldiers of the American Army to Get out of a place of Public Entertainment.”<sup>15</sup> A morale report from autumn 1942 detailed both black and white attitudes. One black staff sergeant complained that as tensions escalated, the British seemed to “like us better than our men.” Whenever black and white American troops met, continued the sergeant, fights ensued. White soldiers resented the attention British women gave African-American soldiers. One white lieutenant responded, “The Irish think that the niggers are quite a novelty and wonder why we raise hell upon finding them

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<sup>13</sup> Memo F.A. Newsam to P.K. Brown, 30 Oct 1942, folder 1, box 32; Records of the Adjutant General’s Section, Administrative Branch, General Correspondence; Records of Headquarters, European Theater of Operations, United States Army, RG 498; National Archives at College Park (NACP).

<sup>14</sup> Letter, Roland Hayes to Eleanor Roosevelt, 8 Nov 1943, folder 1, box 32; Records of the Adjutant General’s Section, Administrative Branch, General Correspondence; Records of Headquarters, European Theater of Operations, United States Army, RG 498; NACP.

<sup>15</sup> Letter, John Bryson, New Wellington Club, to unknown, 4 Mar 1943, folder 1, box 32; Records of the Adjutant General’s Section, Administrative Branch, General Correspondence; Records of Headquarters, European Theater of Operations, United States Army, RG 498; NACP.

in the same hotel or dance floor. In many cases it has been necessary to lay down the law both to the Irish and the coon. . . . It's tough on the niggers but it's the old problem all over again which can never be settled.”<sup>16</sup>

This friction puzzled American authorities. Major General John C.H. Lee ordered a survey on the incidents and Brigadier General Benjamin O. Davis, Sr. handled the investigation. He concluded that antagonism stemmed from white soldiers' resentment of association between the British, particularly women, and black soldiers. In addition, some white soldiers resented the lack of Jim Crow regulations, leading black soldiers to ask, “Who are we over here to fight, the Germans or our own white soldiers?”<sup>17</sup>

Despite the abundance of black service units abroad, black combat units like the 99<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadron remained stateside until mid-1943. The Tuskegee airmen sat in Tuskegee, Alabama for six months on alert, expecting deployment. One pilot had over three-hundred hours in a P-40, and though the Air Forces sent the white classes abroad because of a pressing need for pilots, “nobody seemed to want us,” recalled the airman.<sup>18</sup> The Army Air Forces had difficulty determining where to send the black flyers to maintain segregation and minimize racial trouble. They considered places like Liberia, India, and Burma, where a black squadron might be less objectionable. “The waiting grew tiresome,” recalled Colonel B.O. Davis, Jr., commander of the

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<sup>16</sup> Major Owen L. Crecelius, “Morale Report (Colored Troops), 1-15 Sept 1942, folder 1, box 32; Records of the Adjutant General's Section, Administrative Branch, General Correspondence; Records of Headquarters, European Theater of Operations, United States Army, RG 498; NACP. Not all white soldiers in the report used such harsh language, but most expressed the same sentiment. Only a couple noted that respect was due to any man in an American uniform.

<sup>17</sup> Report, Brigadier General B.O. Davis to Commanding General ETOUSA, “Survey concerning Friction between Colored and White Troops,” 25 Oct 1942. folder 1, box 32; Records of the Adjutant General's Section, Administrative Branch, General Correspondence; Records of Headquarters, European Theater of Operations, United States Army, RG 498; NACP.

<sup>18</sup> J. Todd Moye, *Freedom Flyers: The Tuskegee Airmen of World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 97.

99<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadron. “We had only a casual interest in the war news . . . what little we heard about the war came to us over the radio and in *Time* magazine. The on-again, off again deployment situation created confusion and inconvenience. Members of the squadron made family plans, cancelled them, changed them into new plans to fit our delays, then changed them again.”<sup>19</sup> When Hastie resigned in protest of discriminatory policies in the Army Air Forces, in January 1943, he warned the War Department that he would not hesitate to give public expression to his views on Army Air Force’s policy. True to his word, he voiced his opposition to the “reactionary policy and discriminatory practices of the Army Air Forces” repeatedly to the black press.<sup>20</sup>

The Army Ground Forces demonstrated the same reluctance to use black combat units. In Congress, New York Representative Hamilton Fish, a former white officer of the 369<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment in World War I, led the fight to deploy black troops. One of the infantry regiments given to the French during the First World War, the “Harlem Hellfighters” spent more time than any other American regular unit on the front lines in France, and the French honored their contributions accordingly. In World War II, Fish became one of the most vocal opponents of the War Department’s misuse of black troops. Fish argued to Secretary of War Henry Stimson that the Army repeatedly disbanded black combat units in the United States and transferred the men to labor units.<sup>21</sup> “To say the least,” wrote Fish, “the training of Negro

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<sup>19</sup> Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., *Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. American* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 91.

<sup>20</sup> Stanley Sandler, *Segregated Skies*, 75; William H. Hastie, “Why I Resigned!” in *The Chicago Defender*, (192101967); Feb 6, 1943; Pro Quest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975), p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> Letter, Hamilton Fish to Henry Stimson, 1 Feb 1944, box 1065, entry 363a; Army A-G Decimal File 291.2 1940-1945; Records of the Adjutant General’s Office, 1917-, RG 407; NACP; Truman K. Gibson, *Knocking Down Barriers: My Fight for Black America* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 129-130. Reports of this nature abounded. Fish referred to the Army’s disbandment of several black tank destroyer units, transferring the men to quartermaster truck companies. Another letter to Truman K. Gibson, Judge William H. Hastie’s successor as

personnel as combat units for months and the breaking up of those units and the transferring of that personnel to service units is demoralizing to Negro soldiers and to Negro people generally and a waste of taxpayers' money."<sup>22</sup> Stimson shot back that these charges had no foundation. He responded that the Army had converted black and white units alike, and that the War Department based conversions on the on the abilities and status of the personnel. Larger percentages of African Americans fell into lower educational classifications, argued the Secretary, "and many of the Negro units accordingly have been unable to master efficiently the techniques of modern weapons. To commit such units to combat at the dates of conversion would have endangered operational successes as well as submitted the personnel to unnecessarily high casualty rates."<sup>23</sup>

The correspondence between the congressman and the Secretary of War soon became public and the black press seized on the story. Correspondents claimed that the War Department never intended to place African Americans in combat roles, and educated northerners frequently ended up in service units. Robert Ming, a University of Chicago graduate and law professor at Howard University, served as a private in a quartermaster unit.<sup>24</sup> Using Hastie's resignation and the political sparring between Fish and Stimson, activists maintained steady pressure on the War Department. Hastie publicized the notion that the Army did not find the black units ineffective,

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civilian aide to the Secretary of War, corroborated this, the Army transferred some 484 men from a field artillery battalion to quartermaster, headquarters, and postal units.

<sup>22</sup> Letter, Hamilton Fish to Henry Stimson, 1 Feb 1944, box 1065, entry 363a; Army A-G Decimal File 291.2 1940-1945; Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1917-, RG 407; NACP.

<sup>23</sup> Letter, Henry Stimson to Hamilton Fish, 19 Feb 1944, box 1065, entry 363a; Army A-G Decimal File 291.2 1940-1945; Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1917-, RG 407; NACP.

<sup>24</sup> "A Blow to Negro Morale," *The Chicago Defender* (National edition) (1921-1967); Mar 11, 1944; Pro Quest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975), p. 12.

as Stimson argued, but rather, no commanders wanted them.<sup>25</sup> An Indiana congressman wrote to Stimson contending that the War Department position damaged morale and created widespread dissatisfaction within his district.<sup>26</sup> Hastie's successor as civilian aide, Truman K. Gibson, also maintained that Stimson's stance damaged morale for both black and white troops, arguing that it would make whites unhappy when black Americans did not sustain a share of the casualties. Gibson later referred to Stimson's letter as "one of the most stupid statements ever to come out of the War Department;" it tarred all the department's personnel.<sup>27</sup>

Their persistent efforts paid off. Stimson conceded and the War Department gave the order to commit black troops to combat roles. The Army sent black combat units abroad as a response to public and political pressures and morale, rather than a specific need for combat units.<sup>28</sup> Within months, the 92<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division began deploying to Italy. The Army had placed Major General Edward (Ned) Almond in command of the division in July 1942. A Virginia native and a graduate of the Virginia Military Institute, Almond remained an ardent segregationist until his death in 1975. As commander of the 92<sup>nd</sup>, he rigidly enforced segregation for officers and the enlisted men. Later, Almond held the failures of the 92<sup>nd</sup> responsible for his own failure to be promoted after his command in Korea.<sup>29</sup>

The 92<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division suffered from a host of problems, racist white leadership only one among them. Racial intolerance from local communities initially prevented the 92<sup>nd</sup> from

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<sup>25</sup> Gibson, Jr., *Knocking Down Barriers*, 138.

<sup>26</sup> Letter, Louis Ludlow to Henry Stimson, 20 Mar 1944, box 1065, entry 363a; Army A-G Decimal File 291.2 1940-1945; Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1917-, RG 407; NACP.

<sup>27</sup> Gibson, *Knocking Down Barriers*, 137.

<sup>28</sup> Lee, *Employment of Negro Troops*, 485.

<sup>29</sup> David Halberstam, *The Coldest Winter: America and the Korean War* (New York: Hyperion, 2007), 62.

training as a unit, making cohesion difficult.<sup>30</sup> The unit regrouped and trained at Fort Huachuca, Arizona in May 1943 after the 93<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division vacated the camp. The training period for the 92<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division lasted over nineteen months because, according to Almond, it took longer than the average division for instruction to sink in.<sup>31</sup> Approximately seventy-one percent of the men fell into the lowest categories of the Army General Classification Test, compared to about forty-five percent in other combat divisions. The Army usually avoided placing that volume of men with lower scores in one outfit. It scattered white recruits in the lowest categories in a variety of units with acceptable results. With segregation in place, the Army had limited options and African Americans with lower ratings mostly ended up in the 92<sup>nd</sup>. Mistreatment and low expectations led to low morale in the division from the outset. With the scales already tipped against them, the division headed for Italy.<sup>32</sup>

As black combat units prepared to move overseas, their problems increased. The men would experience what W.E.B. Du Bois had referred to in 1919 as a “double disillusion.” Like their white compatriots, they faced the “frank truth of dirt, disease, cold, wet and discomfort; murder, maiming and hatred.” On top of which they faced the hatred and contempt of their own countrymen, both individual white servicemen and those overseeing them in the War Department. As black troops deployed and fought in World War II, they constantly endured the War Department’s scrutiny as white commanding officers discredited black performance. Authorities exhibited a continuous lack of confidence in black abilities, attempting to relegate them to non-combat assignments.

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<sup>30</sup> Michael Lynch, “Bring on the Buffalo,” U.S. Army Military History Institute, Army Heritage Education Center, October 15, 2010, < <http://www.army.mil/article/46649/>> accessed 12/13/2013.

<sup>31</sup> Daniel K. Gibran, *The 92<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division and the Italian Campaign In World War II* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001), 17.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 17-19.

The 92<sup>nd</sup> deployed piecemeal in the summer of 1944, leading with the 370<sup>th</sup> Regimental Combat Team at the end of July because it possessed the best personnel in the division.<sup>33</sup> African-American service units already abounded in Italy, and the men of the 370<sup>th</sup> arrived in Naples to the cheers of hundreds of black service troops.<sup>34</sup> Soon thereafter, General Mark Clark, commander of the 5<sup>th</sup> Army in Italy, inspected the combat team and made field promotions. The 370<sup>th</sup>'s morale skyrocketed.<sup>35</sup> "Our morale was so high we were ready to go get the enemy with our bare hands. It was the first time we received any recognition," recalled Lieutenant Robert Madison. Another soldier added, "We thought things would be pretty good at that point."<sup>36</sup> In spite of their reception and optimism, the combat team's situation declined. While its combat performance improved in the first month in Italy, white commanders maintained that African-American troops lacked aggressiveness. Trust between black troops and white officers deteriorated. One black lieutenant described Brigadier General John E. Wood, one of the 92<sup>nd</sup> commanders, as a "walking criticism box, contentious and as belittling."<sup>37</sup> Lieutenant Colonel James Robinson noted that Wood "made no effort to conceal his anti-Negro feeling."<sup>38</sup> The situation further deteriorated when the remainder of the division joined the 370<sup>th</sup> that fall. With

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<sup>33</sup> Lee, *Employment of Negro Troops*, 536; Gibran, *The 92<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division*, 41. The Army transferred men who failed tests out of the 370<sup>th</sup> and substituted men with higher aptitude or other qualifications. General Almond still remained skeptical of the unit's abilities.

<sup>34</sup> Gibran, *The 92<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division*, 42. William Perry, interview by Jerri Donohue, 3 May 2007, A. William Perry Collection (AFC/2001/001/51117), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

<sup>35</sup> Lee, *Employment of Negro Troops*, 538.

<sup>36</sup> Robert Madison, interview by Jerri Donohue, not dated., Robert P. Madison Collection (AFC/2001/48858), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. William Perry, interview by Jerri Donohue, 3 May 2007, A. William Perry Collection (AFC/2001/001/51117), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

<sup>37</sup> Jefferson Jordan, interview by Mary Penick Motley, *The Invisible Soldier: The Experience of the Black Soldier, World War II* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1975), 283.

<sup>38</sup> James H. Robinson, interview by L.D. Reddick, not dated, folder 1/12, Lawrence D. Reddick Project, SCRBC, NYPL.

the lack of trust, the troops developed a tendency to panic. Unit cohesiveness suffered because of the division's separate training. Officers and enlisted soon began to believe that the Army had assigned the unit impossible tasks not even worth attempting.<sup>39</sup> Some of the black soldiers even felt that the Army only sent them into combat to be killed—believing that the leaders knowingly ordered the men to their deaths out of racial prejudice.<sup>40</sup>

The division suffered multiple failures throughout the autumn and winter of 1944. In the most notorious failed offensive, Operation Fourth Term (February 1945), poor planning and mediocre strategy sabotaged the American forces. General Almond called the attack off after three days, despite recommendations from General Lucian K. Truscott, Clark's replacement as commander of the 5th Army, that they call off the attack after day one. Almond later argued that “the reason for the failure was due almost entirely to the unreliability of the infantry units as shown by their repeated withdrawals in the face of enemy fire . . . little if any determined offensive spirit to meet the enemy at close quarters existed.”<sup>41</sup> A captain in the 92<sup>nd</sup> described the debacle at the Cinquale Canal as a slaughter. As the men tried to retreat across the canal, they drowned; “they were tattered, and dazed, and limping, and wounded and very resentful.”<sup>42</sup>

Following the offensive failure in Operation Fourth Term neither the division nor the 5<sup>th</sup> Army headquarters believed the 92<sup>nd</sup> capable of strong action. General George C. Marshall planned to reorganize the division and he sent the Japanese-American 442<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Regiment to

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<sup>39</sup> Lee, *The Employment of Negro Troops*, 550.

<sup>40</sup> Survey, Rufus Johnson, not dated, folder 92<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division 371<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment 3d Battalion Company I Johnson, Rufus W. LTC WWII Survey 12309, box 1; World War II Veterans Survey; U.S. Army Heritage Collection (USAHEC), Carlisle, PA.

<sup>41</sup> Gibran, *The 92<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division*, 63.

<sup>42</sup> Allen R. Anderson, interview by L.D. Reddick, not dated, folder 1/7, Lawrence D. Reddick Project, SCRBC, NYPL.

General Almond from France.<sup>43</sup> Truman K. Gibson arrived after the battle to figure out why the division “melted away” under pressure. General Clark had defended Almond, depicting him as a capable division commander, and praised the white battalion and regimental commanders in a report. He intimated that the 92<sup>nd</sup> was the worst division in Italy.<sup>44</sup> Clark restructured the division in several ways, adding white units in a limited form of racial integration, more out of desperation than any commitment to reform. Change arrived too late for the division. In August 1945, General Joseph McNarney, commanding general of the U.S. Army Forces in the Mediterranean Theater, wrote that in the case of the 92<sup>nd</sup>, segregation failed to accomplish combat efficiency. With a limited form of integration, reasoned McNarney, the Army could have demonstrated that “the colored soldier individually can be made into a good combat man.”<sup>45</sup> The Army Ground Forces were not the only branch to give black troops an unfair disadvantage as they moved overseas.

In the Army Air Forces, the 99<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadron entered combat in June 1943 attached to the 33<sup>rd</sup> Fighter Group in North Africa. Full of men from the South, the 33<sup>rd</sup> did not welcome the black pilots and treated the 99<sup>th</sup> as a joke, expecting nothing of the black pilots, ignoring them, and calling individuals “boy.”<sup>46</sup> The next month the 99<sup>th</sup> left North Africa as part of the invasion of Sicily, where the pursuit squadron increasingly provided escorts for bombers or

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<sup>43</sup> Gibran, *The 92<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division*, 63-66.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 63-66.

<sup>45</sup> Memo, Lt. General Joseph McNarney to Chief of Staff, War Department, 13 Aug 1945, box 912; Headquarters MTOUSA, Adjutant General Central Decimal File 291.2; Records of the Mediterranean Theater of Operations, RG 492; NACP.

<sup>46</sup> Bernard C. Nalty, *Strength for the Fight: A History of Black Americans in the military* (New York: Free Press, 1986), 150.

strafing missions.<sup>47</sup> Colonel William Momyer, the commanding officer of the 33<sup>rd</sup>, tended to assign white pilots missions over the Italian mainland after the invasion of Sicily, leaving the 99<sup>th</sup> to patrol Sicilian airspace. Men of the 99<sup>th</sup> went for long periods without even seeing enemy aircraft.<sup>48</sup>

Colonel Momyer proceeded to criticize the 99<sup>th</sup> to his superiors, claiming that the men failed to display aggressiveness or a desire for combat, and that the unit lacked the competence of other squadrons in the fighter group.<sup>49</sup> He requested that the Air Forces remove the unit from combat.<sup>50</sup> Several generals added to this report as it worked its way to Washington from Europe. Major General Edwin House, the ranking U.S. AAF officer in the Italian battle area, added that when it came to rapid movements across Italy, the 99<sup>th</sup> caused problems because of the necessity for segregation.<sup>51</sup> Major General John Kenneth Cannon of the 12<sup>th</sup> Air Force suggested that the black pilots possessed “no outstanding characteristics in which they excel in war the pilots of other squadrons of this command.”<sup>52</sup> Brigadier General Robert Wells Harper, assistant chief of

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<sup>47</sup> Moye, *Freedom Flyers*, 100.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 101.

<sup>49</sup> Nalty, *Strength for the Fight*, 151.

<sup>50</sup> Alan L. Gropman, *The Air Force Integrates, 1945-1964* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, United States Air Force, 1976), 12.

<sup>51</sup> Memo, Major General Edwin House to Major General J.K. Cannon, “Combat Efficiency of the 99<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron” 16 Sept 1943, folder 3, box 103, entry 294a; Security Classified Correspondence (NND 730061), Central Decimal File 291.2; Records of the Army Air Forces, RG 18; NACP.

<sup>52</sup> Memo, Major General J.K. Cannon to Commanding General, Northwest African Air Force, U.S. Army, 18 Sept 1943, folder 3, box 103, entry 294a; Security Classified Correspondence (NND 730061), Central Decimal File 291.2; Records of the Army Air Forces, RG 18; NACP.

staff for operations, pointed out that the 99<sup>th</sup> trained for eight months where as white units required only three months, which spoke volumes about the weakness of the squadron.<sup>53</sup>

When the reports reached Washington, the Chief of Staff's office prepared a report for the President, stating that the 99<sup>th</sup> possessed irreproachable ground discipline but dubious aggressiveness under enemy pressure, permitting "their formations to disintegrate." Frequent attempts had been made to correct the deficiencies to no avail. "It is my consolidated opinion," stated the report, "that our experiences with this unit can lead only to the conclusion that the negro is incapable of profitable employment as a pilot in a forward combat zone. We are therefore proposing to reassign the 99<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron from the forward combat area to a rear defense area."<sup>54</sup> The report reached Colonel Benjamin O. Davis Jr.'s attention just as he traveled to assume command of the 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group in the U.S. to prepare them for combat overseas. Davis fumed that the criticism ought to have come forward as the problems occurred, and should have reached him before Washington. A *Time Magazine* article also appeared entitled, "Experiment Proved?"<sup>55</sup> Within weeks, Davis testified to defend the 99<sup>th</sup> record to the Assistant Secretary of War. "My presentation at the Pentagon did not come near to expressing the depth of the rage I felt about Colonel Momyer's letter, which, after all, was only a reflection of the prevailing AAF attitude toward blacks. I have no way of knowing . . . whether Momyer himself

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<sup>53</sup> Memo, Brigadier General Robert Harper to Assistant Chief of Air Staff, Plans, "Negro Fighter Program," 28 Sept 1943, folder 3, box 103, entry 294a; Security Classified Correspondence (NND 730061), Central Decimal File 291.2; Records of the Army Air Forces, RG 18; NACP.

<sup>54</sup> Letter, Chief of Staff to the President, undated, folder 3, box 103, entry 294a; Security Classified Correspondence (NND 730061), Central Decimal File 291.2; Records of the Army Air Forces, RG 18; NACP. A response to the draft is dated 2 October 1943, likely the draft was written around the last of Sept/first of October. In addition, the draft is not signed by Marshall, so it is unclear if these are his words or orders. The words do fit with some comments Marshall made in the past about a lack of fighting ability for African Americans. But Marshall ended up ordering a study performed before a decision was made one way or the other. Alan L. Gropman, *The Air Force Integrates*, 13.

<sup>55</sup> Davis, Jr., *Davis: American*, 102-105.

or one of the racists on his staff wrote it. I do know, however, that it was written behind my back.” The black pilot program had come within inches of being destroyed, wrote Davis. General Marshall directed his operations branch, G-3, to conduct a study before making a final decision.<sup>56</sup>

In the subsequent study, officials reviewed 99<sup>th</sup> operations and concluded that the record did not reveal any significant difference between this squadron and the others in the Mediterranean. General Hap Arnold, head of the Army Air Forces, admitted that Momyer denied the 99<sup>th</sup> any significant opportunities to display its abilities in combat; to end the experiment based on one combat mission would be ludicrous.<sup>57</sup> With this assessment the role of the 99<sup>th</sup> changed. On the Italian peninsula and attached to the 79<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group, black pilots often flew alongside of whites in combined action. Executive Secretary of the NAACP, Walter White, even described cordial relations between black and white airmen.<sup>58</sup> Joined by the 332<sup>nd</sup> in early 1944, the group flew new P-51 Mustangs with the tails painted red. By the end of the war the 332<sup>nd</sup> possessed an outstanding record, performing as well as white fliers. With high morale, the men flew deep into German territory. “We took deep pride in our mission performance,” remembered Davis. “Our pilots had become experts in bomber escort, and they knew it. Complementary remarks from pilots, navigators, and other bomber crew members came to us by teletype or telephone. . . . They appreciated our practice of sticking with them through the roughest spots over the target.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Davis, Jr., *Davis: American*, 105-107.

<sup>57</sup> Moye, *Freedom Flyers*, 103.

<sup>58</sup> Memo Walter White to the War Department, 1944, box 912; Headquarters MTOUSA, Adjutant General Central Decimal File 291.2; Records of the Mediterranean Theater of Operations, RG 492; NACP.

<sup>59</sup> Davis, *Davis: American*, 124-125.

Black combat units repeatedly encountered authorities skeptical of their abilities. A number of African-American combat units performed successfully in the European Theater: nine field artillery battalions and a number of tank battalions including the famous 761<sup>st</sup>. In areas with heavier combat, racial incidents occurred less frequently because the men had more pressing concerns. NAACP secretary Walter White visited Europe in 1944 and reported on conditions for African-American troops:

As men approach actual combat and the dangers of death the tendency becomes more manifest to ignore or to drop off pettiness such as racial prejudice. At the Anzio Beachhead, for example men eat, sleep, and associate together with apparent complete ignoring of race or color of their neighbors. When German shells and bombs are raining about them, they do not worry as much about the race or creed of the man next to them.<sup>60</sup>

Lieutenant Robert Madison of the 370<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment reflected that “it was a funny feeling, because we were all fighting the same enemy. And while we were in the trenches or while we were moving up the line, it was pretty much all right. When we got back to Florence, for rest and recuperation, it was not alright.” If white servicemen saw African American troops with Italian women, the white men hurled insults at the women. Madison remembered that, as an officer, white men saluted him grudgingly. Yet near the front lines at Christmas, 1944, Madison attended a holiday party near Villa Ferrari where white, black, and Japanese American officers celebrated the Christmas holiday together. As Madison drove back to battalion headquarters the next day a shell struck near his jeep, knocking him out of the vehicle. Wounded in the abdomen and foot, Madison raced to an American outpost as best he could. When white American soldiers caught sight of him, they bandaged him up and sent him to battalion aid.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Memo Walter White to the War Department, 1944, box 912; Headquarters MTOUSA, Adjutant General Central Decimal File 291.2; Records of the Mediterranean Theater of Operations, RG 492; NACP

<sup>61</sup> Robert Madison, interview by Jeri Donohue, not dated, Robert P. Madison Collection (AFC/2001/48858), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

Alexander Jefferson of the 99<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadron crash landed in France during a mission to destroy radar stations. He ejected and parachuted to safety, landing in the midst of the German 20mm gun crew that shot him down. Jefferson spent the next nine months at German prisoner of war (POW) camps. Inmates could choose their barrack-mates and Jefferson recalled that a “dyed –in-the-wool-cracker with the deepest southern drawl imaginable,” picked him, saying, “I think I’ll take this boy.” It turned out that the captured Americans were hiding escape material in the bunk and chose him because he seemed an unlikely German informant. While at home, thought Jefferson, a man like that would have made life difficult. Thousands of miles from home, “they can trust a black man because they are scared to death of a strange white face.”<sup>62</sup>

Emiel Owens of the 777<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Battalion recalled coming out of the Hürtgen Forest after a particularly fierce battle, “Aside from the stench of death, two months of supporting the bloody, close-quarters fighting in mud, snow, and cold added to the devastation of morale.” The grueling push to Germany left black and white servicemen exhausted, disgruntled, and homesick. There was little time for enforcing racial standards. Wounded when a piece of equipment on an artillery gun kicked back and disabled his knee, Owens spent some time in a field hospital, hoping to rejoin his unit as soon as possible. He recuperated among white American troops (most African-American soldiers served in service units leading to lower injury rates). One African-American soldier occupied the bed next to Owens, however. The man had belonged to an anti-aircraft unit that came ashore on D-Day; he lost his leg from above the knee to a mortar shell, and his stomach lay partially open. As a team of doctors made their rounds one morning, a lead doctor stopped and said, “Boy, what are you doing here?” Total silence fell over

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<sup>62</sup> Moyer, *Freedom Flyers*, 114.

the ward. Soldiers ceased talking immediately with astonished looks on their faces. The voice of the colored soldier was impaired; he could scarcely speak. He was stunned at the doctor's comment but did not say anything. The white soldier in the next bed . . . faced the lead doctor and yelled out to him, "He's here to see your mama!" For soldiers who experienced the brutal push to Germany, color had momentarily lost the importance it held on the homefront.<sup>63</sup>

Black combat troops remained scarce in Europe. By December 1944, the Allied position in Europe reached a crucial point. U.S. troops swept through France and Germany, and German resistance thickened along the Siegfried Line as Hitler mounted a counteroffensive against the 1<sup>st</sup> U.S. Army in the Ardennes. When the Battle of the Bulge ended, the Americans had lost 100,000 men and the Germans 120,000. Catastrophic for Germany, losses in troops, tanks, artillery, and other vehicles ensured that they could no longer seriously disrupt Allied offensives into Germany.<sup>64</sup> The battle also left the Allies facing a critical deficiency of riflemen in the theater that the draft could not correct alone. The U.S. began to convert privates from other areas and specialties into infantrymen. Lieutenant General John C.H. Lee, now General Eisenhower's deputy commander, proposed that they include black servicemen in the program. In his initial plan, individual black soldiers would join white units, but many found this idea too revolutionary. General Eisenhower's Chief of Staff at Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force, Lt. General Walter Bedell Smith, attempted to convince Lee that the policy presented too many risks for the War Department. Yet with a manpower emergency on his hands, Lee only saw soldiers to swell his ranks.<sup>65</sup> "Every available weapon at our disposal must

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<sup>63</sup> Emiel Owens, *Blood on German Snow* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2006), 65, 43-44.

<sup>64</sup> Allen R. Millet and Peter Maslowski, *For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States of America* (New York: The Free Press, 1984), 460.

<sup>65</sup> Gibson, *Knocking Down Barriers*, 190-191. And Lee, *Employment of Negro Troops*, 689.

be brought to bear upon the enemy,” Lee avowed in his original directive.<sup>66</sup> Smith predicted that the action would produce serious repercussions in the United States. His concerns never materialized.

Lee was not advocating social integration. He discussed the idea of combing black and white soldiers on the battlefield with General Benjamin O. Davis, Sr., and the Information and Education Division of the War Department also furnished Lee with a study. The study concluded that white troops were largely apathetic to the idea of black troops in their units, and Lee’s own experience with the Red Ball Express had alerted him to the fact that African Americans were eager for combat.<sup>67</sup> After some bureaucratic infighting, Eisenhower redrafted Lee’s directive. He preferred to place African-American trainees into new units rather than as individual replacements—a form of integration. The plan called for the incorporation of black platoons into white companies. Called the fifth platoon project, it levied a quota of two-thousand African-American volunteers for frontline replacements. Within two months, over 4,500 black soldiers volunteered, many giving up rank in order to serve as privates or privates first class. The plan signified a major break with past Army policy.<sup>68</sup>

The Army began training the replacements in late January 1945, and Ground Forces reinforcement commanders remarked that black trainees approached their work with a will. There were few disciplinary problems, and by March the Army had thirty-seven platoons ready for employment. After the terrible months in the Ardennes, white divisions welcomed the black

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<sup>66</sup> Memo, John C.H. Lee, 26 December 1944, [http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study\\_collections/desegregation/large/index.php?action=docs](http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/desegregation/large/index.php?action=docs); Records of the President’s Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services; Security Classified Records, RG 220; Harry S. Truman Library, Independence, MO.

<sup>67</sup> Gibson, *Knocking Down Barriers*, 192-193.

<sup>68</sup> Lee, *Employment of Negro Troops*, 688-690.

platoons.<sup>69</sup> With the platoons in action the favorable responses continued. In a survey of seven infantry divisions with black platoons attached, eight-four percent of white officers responded that the black soldiers performed “very well,” and the remaining sixteen percent responded, “fairly well.” White enlisted men answered much the same.<sup>70</sup> Major General Edwin Parker of the 78<sup>th</sup> Division reported that the black platoons had excellent morale, paid strict attention to duty, and exhibited aggressiveness, common sense, and judgment under fire. They were eager to meet the enemy and destroy him. Parker even proclaimed that he wished he could obtain more of the African-American riflemen.<sup>71</sup> Vincent Malveaux gave up his first sergeant rank to volunteer as a private in a rifle platoon. Malveaux joined the 78<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division east of the Rhine. He recalled that mutual respect and tolerance based on abilities marked the relations between black and white enlisted men. His platoon experienced heavy combat, losing ten men on their first day in action. Malveaux also turned down the position of platoon sergeant because he believed a more experienced white non-commissioned officer should have the job.<sup>72</sup>

Civilian Aide to the Secretary of War Truman K. Gibson found race to be a non-issue in his 1945 tour of the European Theater. He reported that the Army appeared to be making effective use of all available resources, men, and materiel. As one white noncommissioned officer told Gibson, “It don’t matter who’s firing next to you when you’re both killing Krauts.”

The use of African-American infantrymen in the theater boosted the African-American supply

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 693-695.

<sup>70</sup> Research Branch, *The Utilization of Negro Infantry Platoons in White Companies* June 1945 (Headquarters, European Theater of Operations: Research Branch and Education Division), 4-7, box 189; War Department Decimal File, 1942-1947, Security-Classified Correspondence; Records of the War Department General and Special Staffs, RG 165; NACP.

<sup>71</sup> Lee, *Employment of Negro Troops*, 697.

<sup>72</sup> Gerald Astor, *The Right to Fight: A History of African Americans in the Military* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1998), 295; William Weir, *The Encyclopedia of African American Military History* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2004), 198-199.

and service troops' morale. In one black quartermaster depot, men worked voluntarily around the clock. A sergeant explained, "We have got to keep the supplies moving and all of us want to do our part." Officers from a black quartermaster truck company reported that the drivers insisted on delivering white infantrymen into dangerous territory at night in advance of the debarkation points because they "hated to see the 'doughs' walk."<sup>73</sup>

The majority African Americans served in service units, and most service units never came close to combat situations.<sup>74</sup> Those black servicemen who served in combat units, or in service units in combat zones had diverse experiences as well. In some instances, combat could level the playing field and supply a glimpse of life without the colorline, providing a temporary semblance of equality. The experience also reversed the gendered order, demonstrating the limitations of white masculinity. After saving a white serviceman's life, working together against a common enemy, or seeing other races at their most vulnerable and having the scales momentarily reversed, how could black troops revert to the standard racial order? As poet Gwendolyn Brooks asked in 1945 poem, "the progress:" "even if we come out standing up/How shall we smile, congratulate: and how/Settle in Chairs?"<sup>75</sup> The fleeting distortion of the social strata would pass outside of the combat zone, but it had the potential to disrupt certain social constructs.

Some units had the potential to take advantage of this prospective shift. The 761<sup>st</sup> Tank Battalion in Europe entered France better prepared than many black combat units. In its training

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<sup>73</sup> Statement by Truman Gibson, Jr., 9 April 1945. White House File, Nash Papers. Desegregation of the Armed Forces, [http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study\\_collections/desegregation/large/index.php?action=docs](http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/desegregation/large/index.php?action=docs) , Harry S. Truman Library & Museum, Independence, MO.

<sup>74</sup> Lee, *The Employment of Negro Troops*, 636.

<sup>75</sup> Gwendolyn Brooks, *The Essential Gwendolyn Brooks*, ed Elizabeth Alexander (Chicago, IL: Literary Classics of America, 2005), 27.

at Camp Hood, Texas, the unit had received a great deal of positive reinforcement from its commanders and it moved into Europe with high expectations. When the unit arrived in the theater, Major General Willard S. Paul, commander of the 26<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, welcomed the black troops, “I am damned glad to have you with us. We have been expecting you for a long time, and I am sure that you are going to give a good account of yourselves.”<sup>76</sup> Indeed, the 761<sup>st</sup> achieved an admirable combat record with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army in Europe, and the men received numerous commendations for their service. As black soldier Mark Henderson explained, the level of cohesiveness in the 761<sup>st</sup> generated leadership throughout the unit. The men were confident, well-trained, well-led, and welcomed into the European Theater. In their case, the experienced enhanced their ability to associate with an American identity. A proud unit, men in the 761<sup>st</sup> had little tolerance for anyone who shirked or disgraced the name or colors. Henderson held that “combat had a positive, compelling effect on the morale of our men.”<sup>77</sup>

Yet the majority of black troops did not experience combat, and oftentimes those placed into combat situations received limited opportunities for success. For troops who did not receive additional chances to prove their capabilities, combat could have the opposite effect. Not every black serviceman wanted that combat experience. As the fifth platoon project demonstrated, however, a number of black troops did strive for inclusion in this part of the war, suggesting that many black troops realized the currency of that experience. Many also believed that their contributions would not be recognized.<sup>78</sup> For troops with experiences unlike the 761<sup>st</sup> or the

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<sup>76</sup> Survey, Mark Henderson, not dated, folder 761<sup>st</sup> Tank Bn (M) (Sep) Henderson, Mark CWO, WWII-6851 questionnaire, 1941-1946, box 2 Armor Tank Battalions 750-up; World War II Veterans Survey, USAHEC; Ulysses Lee, *The Employment of Negro Troops*, 661.

<sup>77</sup> Survey, Mark Henderson, not dated, folder 761<sup>st</sup> Tank Bn (M) (Sep) Henderson, Mark CWO, WWII-6851 questionnaire, 1941-1946, box 2 Armor Tank Battalions 750-up; World War II Veterans Survey, USAHEC.

<sup>78</sup> A number of black troops complained that the military did not want black heroes. The black press also repeatedly criticized a lack of recognition of African-American contributions throughout the war.

Tuskegee Airmen, the exclusion from combat, the lack of equal opportunity to perform, and subsequent lack of recognition could have the reverse effect and call their identity as Americans into question.<sup>79</sup>

Away from the action the situation stagnated as white servicemen attempted to import American racial customs abroad. A British Member of Parliament's wife delivered a talk, reprinted in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, complaining about white American soldiers. She pointed out that as most Britons had never encountered black Americans, they were surprised to find that racial interactions were prohibited. "The British people welcome the American Army, gratefully, hospitably and sincerely, and they were very distressed to find that if they extended the same cordial welcome to the Negro American soldier they annoyed and displeased the white soldier." The British authorities explained to the British soldiers that while they should be polite to black soldiers, "they must not be too friendly-polite, but curt-polite, nothing more. It has been very difficult for them to explain to the British soldier that somehow in fighting for democracy they have even lost the right to choose their own friends."<sup>80</sup> In spite of white American efforts, African-American servicemen often developed good relations with a variety of Europeans. As Staff Sergeant Frederic Clanagan wrote to Howard University, the people in Great Britain generally welcomed the African-American troops.<sup>81</sup> Likewise, other Europeans, allies and enemies, gave the black troops unexpected receptions.

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<sup>79</sup> Ronald Krebs, *Fighting for Rights* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006). Krebs made the point that the exclusion from combat impeded the African-American ability to make claims to a first-class citizenship in the postwar period.

<sup>80</sup>"U.S. Army Officers Spread Anti-Negro Feeling in England," *The Pittsburgh Courier* (1911-1950); Mar 20, 1943; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Pittsburgh Courier (1911-2002), p. 5. Article contains excerpts from an address by Mrs. Patricia Strauss before the National Urban League in February, 1943.

<sup>81</sup> Letter, Frederic F. Clanagan to Mr. Nabrit. 7 May 1944, Collection of Letters from Howard University Men and Women in the Armed Forces, 1941-1946, box A-I 122-1, folder: Clanagan, Frederic F.—1944 (typescript); Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

One African-American enlisted man commented that although there were no black people in Ireland, the Irish treated the soldiers as comrades. Another corporal said much the same, that the civilians were white, but “fine people” who “never heard of discrimination.”<sup>82</sup> Lieutenant Frances Flats of the Women’s Army Corps (WAC) said the British welcomed the black troops with open arms. The hospitality committee in Birmingham, England often invited WACs to attend dinners and spend weekends with them. In one town the mayor hosted a luncheon for the women. English people even contacted her to ask for WACs to speak about American culture. She recalled that the British had a song about the black troops, “Choc’late Soldier from the USA,” which the African Americans initially resented but which the British intended as a compliment of sorts:

They used to call them lazy bones in Harlem,  
Used to call them that all the time,  
But now they’re over here fighting in the Army,  
Chocolate Soldier from the USA.<sup>83</sup>

Another African-American Red Cross worker visited a number of cities throughout the country. She wrote to Howard University about the people of color she met around Liverpool and Cardiff. Many of them were mixed as the result of the unions between foreign sailors and British women. There were Maltese, Arab, African, Chinese, and Greek-English combinations. Although the British government did not impress her, she mentioned that the “British people of all classes accepted the colored American unreservedly accept [sic] when insidious propaganda had been spread previously.” Despite vicious rumors that white Americans sometimes

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<sup>82</sup> Memo, Owen L. Crecelius, Base Censor to Commanding General ETOUSA, “Morale Report (Colored Troops),” 16 Sept 1942, folder 1, box 32; Records of the Adjutant General’s Section, Administrative Branch, General Correspondence; Records of Headquarters, European Theater of Operations, United States Army, RG 498; NACP.

<sup>83</sup> Frances Flats, interview by L.D. Reddick, 25 Mar 1946, folder 1/14, Lawrence D. Reddick Project, SCRBC, NYPL.

propagated, any British prejudice evaporated quickly. “Those who have been fortunate enough to go abroad with the American Red Cross,” she wrote, have been “enriched by the contacts as well as by the heartaches.” She considered “it an invaluable continuation of their education and will be better able to serve their country and their race in the post-war world.”<sup>84</sup>

Wilbur Young recalled that friendly Scottish people in the United Kingdom took to the black troops immediately. The women and elderly people of Scotland evinced particular interest in the black troops, he remembered. Elderly Scots wanted to know about the black soldiers’ background and why the white soldiers spread rumors. “They accepted us quite readily and invited us to come back,” affirmed Young. En route to Liverpool as well, he continued, British hospitality persisted. He and another black soldier shared a compartment with a middle-aged white woman and child, a young woman, a British soldier, and two British sailors. “Everybody was congenial. We gabbed and talked. Had a stop and the two sailors dashed out and got tea for everybody.” When the British found it was the Americans’ first trip there, they suggested some points of interest, “There was no hostility.” Yet Young also remembered meeting East Indians while in England; he described them as the “most impoverished, miserable and unhappy little beings that I ever had the chance to see.” He recollected one, wrapped in a dirty sheet in wintertime, looking in garbage cans for food. On a huge ship called the *Empress of India*, West Indians worked as laborers. Young made a point to speak with some of them—miserably paid the majority seemed small and thin. The men never fought back, Young mused, they were fully occupied with eking out a mere existence.<sup>85</sup> As one *Pittsburgh Courier* article pointed out, the

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<sup>84</sup> Letter Anastasia E. Scott to Mr. Nabrit, not dated, Collection of Letters from Howard University Men and Women in the Armed Forces, 1941-1946, box RI-Z, 122-1, folder Scott, Anastasia E.—No Date (holograph) 137; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>85</sup> Wilbur Young, interview by L.D. Reddick, 9 Aug 1946, folder 1/13, Lawrence D. Reddick Project, SCRBC, NYPL.

colorline manifested in Britain among the middle class and *pukka sahibs* (gentlemen of the first class) living in the colonial empire. Even so, claimed the journalist, race prejudice in Britain never reached the levels of the American South and black American soldiers received a warm welcome from the British population.<sup>86</sup>

In Italy, the men of the 92<sup>nd</sup> also developed cordial relationships with Italian civilians. While white Americans attempted to spread misinformation, civilians and African-Americans, many black soldiers described a bond between the Italians and the African-American GI's.<sup>87</sup> "Whites wanted the Italians to speak English instead of trying to learn Italian," averred one black soldier.<sup>88</sup> Another explained that when Italians begged for food, African-American troops gave whatever they could. He observed white soldiers in Rome mistreating Italian women, but never saw that behavior from black soldiers.<sup>89</sup> Sergeant Cyril O. Byron of the 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group recalled men interacting frequently with Italian children. At first, said Byron, the children ran around the soldiers, asking for candy, eagerly yelling "soldato, soldato!" An Italian police officer told the airmen that the children were looking for tails that white Americans said black troops had. The soldiers gave the children candy and chewing gum, and eventually the children realized that the rumors were untrue. Byron even remembered some children taking groups of

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<sup>86</sup> George Padmore, "British Tolerance, Answer to Color Issue Overseas, Writes War Correspondent," *The Pittsburgh Courier* (1911-1950); January 2, 1943; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Pittsburgh Courier (1911-2002) p. 2.

<sup>87</sup> Motley, *The Invisible Soldier*, 259.

<sup>88</sup> Charles Brown, interview by Motley, *The Invisible Soldier*, 271.

<sup>89</sup> Isham G. Benton, interview by Douglas Clanin, not dated, Isham G. Benton Collection (AFC 2001/001/9170). Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. A number of other interviews in Motley, *The Invisible Soldier*, documented convivial relationships between black soldiers and Italians. Lieutenant Wade McCree of the 365<sup>th</sup>, for instance, also noted that black GI's and Italians tried to communicate with one another while many whites did not bother to learn Italian. He argued that black men related to the Italians because both groups knew what it meant to suffer, 300.

soldiers into their homes to meet their parents.<sup>90</sup> Another unit in the 92<sup>nd</sup> picked up an Italian boy who spoke English, Italian, and German. They asked the boy if he wanted to be a soldier and with the permission of his mother, gave him a uniform and a rifle and he stayed with them for the duration of the war. A soldier remembered that when it was time for them to return home, the boy wanted to join them.<sup>91</sup>

As a remnant of World War I, black troops heard rumors of France as a bastion of racial tolerance. The experience in World War II was much the same. War torn and tired, French civilians greeted American troops as liberators. Those African-American soldiers who entered Paris found an overwhelmingly positive reception. As one *Baltimore Afro-American* correspondent wrote, “The heart of France, in fact, was mad with joy because Americans had arrived.” Women “dashed into the streets to kiss dusty GI lads.” Some brought babies for the soldiers to kiss.<sup>92</sup> This reception in France impressed Frederic Clanagan as well. Clanagan described the scene in a letter, reflecting, “I cannot dwell too largely upon the fantastic eruptions of massed joy noted on the faces of the people here, their demonstrations too when you pass through the liberated towns of France. . . . Somehow it is much, much too large for me.” From the moment soldiers left their vehicles, he continued, “you are kissed and hugged and mauled by frenzied, friendly, elated mobs. . . . Even though you know a little French, you are left speechless, ‘*merci*’ being the most overworked French word, you just say that.” Children, old women, grownup men, and beautiful French girls surrounded the soldiers. Most had British,

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<sup>90</sup> Dr. Cyril O. Byron, 99<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadron and 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group, interview by Sarah Barksdale, 16 March 2012, Baltimore, Maryland.

<sup>91</sup> Luther E. Hall, interview by Douglas Clanin, Luther Hall Collection (AFC/2001/001/28690) Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

<sup>92</sup> Ollie Stewart, “Liberation of Paris,” in *This is Our War: Selected Stories of Six War Correspondents who were sent Overseas by the Afro-American Newspapers: Baltimore, Washington, Philadelphia, Richmond and Newark* (Baltimore, MD: The Afro-American Company, 1945), 9.

French, or American flags in hand and poured cognacs and ciders liberally upon the soldiers in the street. “You are gay in a sense and somewhat melancholy in another sense because you know of the inevitable catastrophe to be confronted back in the United States.”<sup>93</sup> He marveled, however, at the strength of mind the Parisians demonstrated in spite of the years of occupation. They met danger and opposition boldly over the past four years, marveled Clanagan. “The liberation of Paris will not be forgotten very soon by any of us.”<sup>94</sup>

Journalist Roi Ottley reported that the “legendary French liberalism” survived Nazi occupation. In Paris, he wrote, the “Negro unquestionably has personal dignity, freedom of movement, and may marry whom he chooses.” It was, said Ottley, the “nearest approach to civilized living for the black man.”<sup>95</sup> This understanding of France as a bastion of democracy stemmed from World War I contacts; W.E.B. Du Bois described France as the “only real white democracy.” For years, other black intellectuals and artists fled the racism in the United States and escaped to work in Paris.

Other countries in Europe left similar impressions upon black troops. On rest and relaxation both during and after the war, many had the opportunity to travel. In winter 1945, Lieutenant Robert Madison received word in Italy that families in Switzerland were hosting American soldiers for Christmas. He took advantage and spent Christmas with a Swiss family. Madison toured Bern, Zurich, and Ingleberg, even skied in the Swiss Alps. While in Zurich

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<sup>93</sup> Letter, Frederic Clanagan to Mr. Nabrit. 30 August 1944, Collection of Letters from Howard University Men and Women in the Armed Forces, 1941-1946, box A-I 122-1, folder: Clanagan, Frederic F.—1944 (typescript); Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>94</sup> Letter, Frederic F. Clanagan to Mr. Nabrit. 16 Oct 1944, Collection of Letters from Howard University Men and Women in the Armed Forces, 1941-1946, box A-I 122-1, folder: Clanagan, Frederic F.—1944 (typescript); Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>95</sup> Roi Ottley, “Frenchmen Refused to Accept Nazi’s Prejudice Against Negroes,” in *The Pittsburgh Courier* (1911-1950); Feb 24, 1945. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Pittsburgh Courier (1911-2002), pg. 4.

some Swiss girls invited him to dinner before he headed back to Italy.<sup>96</sup> Edna Sanders of the Women's Army Corps (WACS) also spent time in Switzerland during her post in Great Britain. On furlough with a group of African-American WACS, Sanders admitted that the Swiss people left an impression on her. Different racial groups lived together amicably. The Swiss could not comprehend the American form of democracy with its racial hypocrisies.<sup>97</sup>

Even encounters with the enemy sometimes proved enlightening. On a snowy day in January 1945, Corporal Isham Benton of the 365<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment took a patrol into the Italian countryside. They broke into houses, entering quickly in an attempt to surprise any enemy combatants. It scared the Italians horribly, explained Benton; the people went into shock and then the soldiers had to calm them down, and "we were scared too." Their patrol found the enemy in a two-story farmhouse on a hill. The Germans spread the alarm and started firing from the house as the American patrol radioed for artillery support. One of his men almost lost a leg, and Benton grabbed him, dragging the soldier into the safety of an alcove at the rear of the skirmish as the rest of the American patrol pulled out. "Cold, snow, and ice everywhere," said Benton, "but I wasn't cold, I was just scared." He emerged from the alcove into a circle of German soldiers. After a tense moment, an Alpine guide stepped forward and stated, "for you the war is over," and took Benton prisoner.

The other American soldier died soon thereafter, and the Germans jailed Benton in a small-town cellar jail. The Italians packed straw into the cell to keep him warm. As the Italians had little experience with African Americans, they seemed curious about the prisoner. "Those people were nice to me, like I was some animal they had caught. They didn't know nothing

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<sup>96</sup> Robert Madison, interviewed by Jerri Donohue, not dated, Robert Madison Collection, (AFC/2001/001/48858), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

<sup>97</sup> Frances Flats, interview by L.D. Reddick, 25 Mar 1946, folder 1/14, Lawrence D. Reddick Project, SCRBC, NYPL.

about me but they treated me that way. So I have a warm spot in my heart because ordinary people in Italy always treated me very nice,” Benton recalled. One afternoon, an Italian officer removed Benton from his cellar jail and took him to a mountain villa. The officer had spent some time in the United States as part of a diplomatic corps. He was eager to speak with an American. The man introduced Benton to his girlfriend, treated him as a guest, and they lunched together. It was a pleasant way to spend an afternoon, said Benton; then the man sent him back to his cellar.

Benton spent over four months as a POW, eventually relocating to Germany’s Stalag VII-A. There, the Germans held approximately twenty other black soldiers, grouped together for counting but not otherwise segregated. In Stalag VII-A, Benton lived and ate with four white Americans. Prisoners experienced grueling conditions at Stalag VII-A, and rations fell low toward the end of the war. They ate unidentifiable meat, sauerkraut, and beans; and most suffered from tremendous weight loss. In spite of these conditions, Benton felt that for the first time in his life, as a POW in Nazi Germany, he was treated with equality. “What I received was respect and dignity, something I had not received from American white people in the United States all my life, and that’s a heck of a thing to have to compare.” He described the camp as the “UN of POWs;” people from all over the world filled the camp—New Zealanders, British, Americans, Africans, and Australians. The experience exposed Benton to both the enemy and other countries. Learning from books and newspapers could not compare, he recalled. “When you get over there, and you begin to see how people *are*, how the Germans *are* as individual

people, German soldier's a soldier, just a man you know, just like you and me." In the end, "people are usually pretty much the same."<sup>98</sup>

African-American POWs in Europe experienced much the same. Pilot Harold Brown spent time in camps in southern Germany. He and another black prisoner used to joke that, "hey, we're finally integrated, and we had to get shot down to become integrated." The Germans placed everyone in the same compound regardless of color, observed Brown. He was a pilot, an Allied serviceman rather than a black person. All the Allied POWs were in the same boat, "suffering the same way, day in and day out."<sup>99</sup> Luther Smith, another black pilot, sustained injuries as he bailed out of his plane and spent time as a POW in a medical facility. In the hospital one day, a German SS major approached Smith to talk to an American about the German surrender he felt was imminent. The German referred to Smith as *schwarzer Amerikaner* (black American), and questioned Smith as to why he fought for a country that lynched black people. "It hit me like a bomb," said Smith. "I couldn't tell him, you're absolutely rights. I said to him, *nein, nein, nein, nein*, you're all wrong. . . . I wasn't going to admit it." Smith ruminated that he had never considered the question in that light. "I'm trying to be an American. I'm trying to be the best I can. Of course, I volunteered because I thought it was the best thing I could possibly do. . . . It was the only real good, honorable thing that black people could actually do to be measured along with everybody else."<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Isham George Benton, interviewed by Douglas Clanin, not dated, Isham G. Benton Collection (AFC 2001/001/9170) and (AFC/2001/001/28694). Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

<sup>99</sup> Thomas Saylor, *Long Hard Road: American POWs during World War II* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2007), 132.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid*, 133-134. While African American POWs generally seemed treated about the same by German captors, other racial and ethnic groups sometimes reported otherwise. Jewish POWs were oftentimes picked out and shipped to concentration camps. In addition, some Mexican-American POWs noted that they received particularly harsh treatment at German hands.

These interactions with the enemy surprised artilleryman Emiel Owens as well. Toward the end of March 1945, Allied forces crossed the Rhine River. Owens and an advance party of three soldiers from the 777<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Battalion entered the town of Dinslaken to set up an observation post and set up the units' guns to support advancing infantrymen. The men chose a large two-story house and approached cautiously through the front. A middle-aged woman stood on the top floor. She raised her hands and yelled hysterically, "*Nicht schiessen, nicht schiessen, bitte nicht schiessen!*" (Don't shoot, don't shoot, please don't shoot). Owens responded in broken German to calm her, and the soldiers advanced to the second floor where the rest of the family breakfasted—a teenage girl, a young woman, and an older man. They offered Owens some of their boiled eggs, brown bread, meat, and coffee, though he refused. Owens particularly remembered the young woman; she seemed quite calm and not excited or afraid even when the American soldiers told the family to leave. At the time, Owens recalled feeling suspicious after reading about female German spies in the *Stars and Stripes*. Yet before they left, the woman asked for his name and then walked up to him and rubbed her finger across his face. "*Warum Du Schwarz sind?* (Why are you black?) *Ist es die Sonne?*" (Is it the sun?)" The family left shortly thereafter as the American commandeered the house. Owens wrote that the encounter stayed with him long after. He saw fear on the young woman's face but no panic as she faced foreign troops with black faces and carbines in her home. She stayed calm when she realized the Americans meant her no harm. It left Owens with an enduring feeling, seeing the family at breakfast. After he quelled their fears, the family sat back down, finished their food, said a blessing, and offered to share. "My mind drifted back to my grandmother's kitchen table at home," said Owens. "Strangely, the meal, style of serving, time for reverence, and sharing were the same as at home. You may ask, how I would even think like this of my enemy? My only

answer is we tend to believe at once in evil things and only believe in good upon reflection. Is this not sad?"<sup>101</sup>

Wilbur Young, serving in an engineering battalion, picked up some German from the prisoners as his unit moved through France. He occasionally served as an interpreter as they advanced into Germany. Young and his unit entered a small town in Germany still full of civilians; German troops held the far end of the town. Like Owens, Young and his men picked a suitable house; they selected one and told an old woman and her four daughters they needed to leave. When the girls cried, the soldiers relented, saying they could find another house. When the big family found they could keep their house, they hugged and kissed the black soldiers. For the period that the Americans occupied the town, the German women came to their house and washed and ironed their clothes.<sup>102</sup>

These interactions between black servicemen and white European irritated many white American troops. Yet what more often incurred their wrath was the interracial intimacy between African-American servicemen and white European women. The War Department allowed these relationships to occur abroad because policy dictated that they could not govern these interactions overseas.<sup>103</sup> As a result, these romantic and sexual liaisons occurred frequently throughout the theater. The encounters opened new realms of possibility for many black servicemen, accustomed to a social structure in which just a look could have violent repercussions. This very visible form of protest reverberated on both sides of the Atlantic, and

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<sup>101</sup> Emiel Owens, *Blood on German Snow*, 83-86, 131.

<sup>102</sup> Wilbur Young, interview by L.D. Reddick, 9 Aug 1946, folder 1/13, Lawrence D. Reddick Project, SCRBC, NYPL.

<sup>103</sup> Alex Lubin, *Romance and Rights: The Politics of Interracial Intimacy, 1945-1954* (Jackson: MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 99.

the proliferation of interracial intimacy and mixed-race babies had the potential to strike a serious blow to segregation.

All across Europe, black troops had intimate relations with civilian women. In Italy, black troops controlled the supply lines, recalled one soldier, and they often passed out gifts to the women. In addition, argued the soldier, African-American troops made more effort to learn the language and they “would treat the Italian women like White men treat American women and Negro men should treat colored American women but don’t.”<sup>104</sup> Lieutenant Robert Madison of the 370<sup>th</sup> Infantry regiment joked that the Italian women must have been intrigued by those stories about tails and wanted to see for themselves. Whenever white troops saw black soldiers with Italian women, he recalled, even just friends, they leveled offensive comments at the women.<sup>105</sup>

A 1946 *Pittsburgh Courier* headline, “Thousands of Tan GIs Never Will See Their English-born Children,” attested to the proliferation of interracial relationships in Great Britain as well. War correspondent Roi Ottley asserted that Manchester alone was home to over six-hundred mixed babies.<sup>106</sup> Ottley argued that Europeans often viewed Americans as childlike and obnoxious. The black troops, used to a certain behavior around white people, exhibited more restraint around Europeans. To Europeans, wrote Ottley, this appeared as “gentlemanly grace and charm.” Moreover, African Americans oftentimes handled the food supplies and were “quite generous with Uncle Sam’s rations.” Black soldiers offered “a can of spam the first day;

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<sup>104</sup> Leonard D. Stevens, interview by L.D. Reddick, 27 December 1945, folder 1/12, Lawrence D. Reddick Project, SCRBC, NYPL.

<sup>105</sup> Robert P. Madison, interviewed by Jerri Donohue, not dated, Robert P. Madison Collection (AFC/2001/001/48858), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

<sup>106</sup> Roi Ottley, “Thousands of Tan GIs Never Will See Their English-born Children,” *Pittsburgh Courier* (1911-1950); Mar 2, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Pittsburgh Courier (1911-2002).

the second day, chocolates; the third day, a date.” The white GIs skipped the pleasantries and asked for a date, reported the correspondent. He estimated that in Great Britain alone there were about twenty thousand mixed race babies. While Ottley likely exaggerated this estimate greatly, his and other exorbitant approximations within the black press demonstrated the way the press understood the importance of this interracial intimacy.<sup>107</sup>

The possibility of interracial relationships left British officials unenthusiastic. British authorities had initially attempted to limit the numbers of black American troops in Britain partially to prevent interracial sexual liaisons that might complicate U.S.-British cooperation. When the plan to limit the proliferation of black troops proved futile, the British War Cabinet attempted to concentrate black troops in areas like Liverpool, a port city, because rural British women who had no experience with African Americans did “not know how to take the negroes and, as a matter of fact, are very much attracted by them.”<sup>108</sup> In 1943 American actor Burgess Meredith narrated a film for the British War Ministry, *Overpaid, Oversexed, and Over Here* as part of the *Welcome to Britain* series. Meredith explained that white American troops would witness interactions and relationships between black troops and Englishwomen. While the United States did not condone these relationships, he advised white Americans to tolerate them as “we’re not at home,” and “if we bring a lot of prejudices here what are we going to do about ‘em?”<sup>109</sup> From an official standpoint, both countries were unenthusiastic about racial mingling.

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<sup>107</sup> Roi Ottley, interview by L.D. Reddick, not dated, folder 1/11, Lawrence D. Reddick Project, SCRBC, NYPL. *The Pittsburgh Courier* later reported that these numbers were likely greatly exaggerated, and even 5,000 mixed babies was possibly on the high end. “Report on British Babies Exaggerated,” in *The Pittsburgh Courier (1911-1950)*; May 31, 1947. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Pittsburgh Courier (1911-2002), p. 18. Other reports later placed the numbers of babies between 500 and 1,700.

<sup>108</sup> Smith, *When Jim Crow Met John Bull*, quoting suggestions from the War Cabinet, 188.

<sup>109</sup> *Welcome to Britain* quoted in Lubin, *Romance and Rights*, 99.

Despite these official efforts, as one black Private First Class noted, “All the girls are crazy about us.”<sup>110</sup> British women took care to invite black troops to parties, church, Sunday school, and other social functions. “We appreciate it to the highest,” added another black soldier.<sup>111</sup> Scotland featured ten women to every man, avowed Wilbur Young. At times, he continued, if you asked a woman to dance, she almost knocked you down in her enthusiasm to dance with you. Thanks to the presence of earlier American troops, the bands all played jitterbugs, though the white MPs were less than pleased to see Scottish women having so much fun with the African American men.<sup>112</sup>

German women showed even more enthusiasm for the black troops. The lack of a legal or informal color line in Germany led to greater freedom for black troops, particularly with women. In spite of the Nazi regime’s racial theories, German society did not have a longstanding history of institutionalized racism, though the country was not a bastion of racial equality. In the post-World War I period, German resentment spurred campaigns belittling French colonial troops from Senegal.<sup>113</sup> Like many Europeans, Germans had little exposure to people of color. Reports abounded of German women enamored with African Americans’ looks. They admired their brown eyes, curly hair, and dark skin, reported one *Pittsburgh Courier* correspondent. Few Germans had dark hair or eyes, wrote the reporter, so it was a desirable characteristic. The soldiers’ “exotic otherness” attracted the German women, like the French and

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<sup>110</sup> Report, Base Censor Office #1 to Commanding General, E.T.O.U.S.A., 16 Sept 1942, box 32; Records of the Adjutant General’s Section, Administrative Branch, General Correspondence; Records of Headquarters, European Theater of Operations, United States Army, RG 498; NACP.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Wilbur Young, interview by L.D. Reddick, 9 Aug 1946, folder 1/13, Lawrence D. Reddick Project, SCRBC, NYPL.

<sup>113</sup> Höhn and Klimke, *A Breath of Freedom*, 45.

British.<sup>114</sup> One black soldier believed that German women liked African Americans' "style of dancing and their apparent care-free manner." At first, remembered the soldier, the black troops and German women distrusted one another. On the women's side, he speculated that the Nazi propaganda played a role. The African Americans, well aware of the Nazi attitudes, took offense at phrases like *du bist Neger*, however inoffensively meant.<sup>115</sup>

In Berlin, reported *Ebony*, African-American troops found that "democracy has more meaning on *Wilhelmstrasse* than on Beale Street in Memphis." Many young German women had African-American boyfriends. Some unknown composer in Berlin captured the spirit of these "close friendships" with the song, *Madel, Liebst Du Einen Schwarzen Amerikaner*, "Little Girl, If you Love a Black American:"

Little girl, if you love a black American  
Little girl, just love him always  
When he is with you in the evening

Little girl, if you kiss a black American, just kiss him always  
Because it is only for a short time

And when he goes back to America  
Little girl, don't wait for your happiness  
Because he is not coming back.<sup>116</sup>

At that moment in Berlin, African-American troops could openly associate with and date white German women. The association of these blonde German or Austrian women with the black American troops caused a mild scandal in white American military circles in Europe, reported Roi Ottley. Germans usually reacted to these relationships with indifference, though at

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid, 45-46.

<sup>115</sup> Raymond S. Gamble, interview by L.D. Reddick, 5 Mar 1946, folder 1/9, Lawrence D. Reddick Project, SCRBC, NYPL.

<sup>116</sup> "Germany Meets the Negro Soldier," in *Ebony*, October 1946, pp. 1-5.

times young women faced reprisals from German men.<sup>117</sup> While the relationships sometimes caused rude stares and appalled a number of German citizens, the black troops were not subject to arrest or violence (except sometimes from white American troops) as in the United States.<sup>118</sup> For many black servicemen, this proved a revolutionary experience.

Medgar Evers entered the Army in 1943, and stationed overseas he spent much time with a French family. In France, for the first time, Evers felt that whites treated him like a human being. Evers became romantically involved with one of the daughters. “He was very much in love,” his wife Myrlie Evers later wrote. The experience affected him deeply. In Mississippi, to look at a white woman meant danger for African-American men. In France, Evers walked with the woman, kissed her in public, and had the approval of her parents. For the first time Evers felt (and was allowed to feel) real affection for someone of a different race. He considered remaining in France and marrying the young woman. When he made the decision to return home, however, taking a white bride back to Mississippi seemed foolhardy. The episode convinced him, however, that blacks and whites could cohabitate peacefully, and of the unnaturalness of the racial order in Mississippi.<sup>119</sup>

While the War Department could not prevent interracial relationships, it could limit them to spaces abroad. War Department policy made it extremely difficult for black troops to marry white European women. The Army discouraged marriages for all of its troops abroad, black and white. In addition, authorities gave troops little assurance that once married the war brides could

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<sup>117</sup> Roi Ottley, “Tan Yanks Shared Their Food and Won Hearts of German Girls,” in *The Pittsburgh Courier* (1911-1950); Dec 8 1945. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Pittsburgh Courier (1911-2002), p. 20.

<sup>118</sup> Maria Höhn and Martin Klimke, *A Breath of Freedom*, 48, 45.

<sup>119</sup> Myrlie Evers-Williams, *The Autobiography of Medgar Evers: Revealed Through His Writings, Letters, and Speeches* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 6; Charles Evers and Andrew Szanton, *Have No Fear: The Charles Evers Story* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1997), 48.

ever come to the United States. A servicemen needed his company commander's consent to marry, making the task doubly difficult for African Americans. White commanders often attempted to thwart black servicemen's attempts to marry white women abroad and bring them back to the United States. At times, they shipped black troops to other camps in Europe or the U.S.<sup>120</sup> White commanders cited anti-miscegenation laws in the U.S. Assistant Secretary of War Howard Peterson noted that while marriage regulations should be applied without regard to race, applications could not be approved if the black serviceman resided in a state with these laws.<sup>121</sup> Many of the black troops who managed to marry European women, wrote journalist Roi Ottley, remained in Europe.<sup>122</sup> Soldier Wilbur Young stationed in South Wales felt that African-American soldiers fit into the Welsh home life well—the Welsh depended on coal mining and steel work, and workers got along well with the black troops. “A few marriages happened right off the bat,” remembered Young, and very few of those men came back to the United States after the war but settled in Wales instead.<sup>123</sup>

One Army Air Forces colonel explained that these “marriages are considered to be against the best interests of the parties concerned and of the service.” Theater commanders had the final word on these mixed marriages.<sup>124</sup> General Joseph McNarney, the military governor of occupied Germany, reportedly expressed to Civilian Aide Truman K. Gibson that African

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<sup>120</sup> Roi Ottley, “Thousands of Tan GIs Never Will See Their English-born Children,” *Pittsburgh Courier* (1911-1950); Mar 2, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Pittsburgh Courier (1911-2002), p. 14.

<sup>121</sup> Lubin, *Romance and Rights*, 101.

<sup>122</sup> Roi Ottley, “Thousands of Tan GIs Never Will See Their English-born Children,” *The Pittsburgh Courier* (1911-1950); Mar 2, 1946; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Pittsburgh Courier (1911-2002), p. 14.

<sup>123</sup> Wilbur Young, interview by L.D. Reddick, 9 Aug 1946, folder 1/13, Lawrence D. Reddick Project, SCRBC, NYPL.

<sup>124</sup> Defender Washington Bureau, “Army Bars Mixed Marriages, Sanctions Illegitimate Babies!” in *The Chicago Defender (National edition)* (1921-1967); May 5, 1945. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975), p. 1.

Americans failed as soldiers, and it would take a hundred years for blacks to develop to a point where they would “be on a parity with white Americans.”<sup>125</sup> McNarney made it clear during the occupation that he would not permit American troops to marry German women.<sup>126</sup>

Despite these impediments, many black troops attempted to bring their white girlfriends, fiancés, or brides back to the United States. More often than not, the War Department buried their requests in bureaucratic red tape. A war bride still had to apply for a visa to move to the United States, which meant that her African-American husband needed to disclose personal information and finances. Marriage licenses or travel visas often failed to arrive or the War Department “misplaced” them.<sup>127</sup> James Bilotta fought as an automatic rifleman in France, Germany, and the Austrian Tyrol. In April and May 1945 as American troops overran Bavaria, Bilotta helped liberate Dachau. Here, Bilotta met a woman named Friedel. “When I met Friedel . . . she weighed about 85 pounds and was half-starved and nearly done in,” described Bilotta. The young woman entered the camps in 1938 at age fourteen, and in 1945 Bilotta nursed her back to health as he searched for the rest of her family. He traded cigarettes and rations with German farmers to get nourishing food and the necessary clothing for her. Eventually, he wrote, “our constant companionship and friendship turned into love.”

In 1948 Bilotta asked the NAACP for help. “I have been engaged in a three-year battle to get my fiancée over from Germany,” he wrote. After being discharged in Frankfurt, Bilotta began working for the War Department in occupied Germany. “I began writing pieces to the Paris edition of the *New York Herald Tribune* protesting various acts lacking the essence of

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<sup>125</sup> “ ‘Didn’t say it’ –McNarney: But Truman Gibson Insists Commander of the U.S. Army in Europe Slurred Negro Soldiers as Being ‘Unfit,’” in *The Pittsburgh Courier (1911-1950)*; Sep 28, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Pittsburgh Courier (1911-2002), p. 1.

<sup>126</sup> “Germany Meets the Negro Soldier,” in *Ebony*, October 1946, Vol. 1, Issue 11, pp. 1-5.

<sup>127</sup> Lubin, *Romance and Rights*, 101.

democracy,” Bilotta explained: poor treatment for Jewish refugees, the acquittal of German Staff Officer Franz von Papen at Nuremburg. The occupation authorities soon ousted the veteran from Germany. After returning home in 1946, Bilotta straightened out his own affairs and dispatched the necessary documents to Frankfurt so Friedel could join him in the U.S. The Counter Intelligence Corps (CIC) began an investigation of the young woman. “Friedel was subjected to a series of grilling and political interrogations,” he wrote, and “it seemed that I was the one being investigated rather than her.” The CIC “suggested rather indelicately that there were other boys around for her in Frankfurt.”<sup>128</sup>

Another black soldier in Germany fathered a child and ran into trouble with his commanding officer. After some disciplinary problems, superiors confined Robert Bennett to the base. When his girlfriend came to visit him on post, the doctor told her not to come to the base or be seen in the streets of Roth with the baby, as it offended Colonel Glass. A couple days later, the soldier met with the colonel. “He told me,” wrote the soldier, “your girl is a hoare and the baby is a bastared [sic]” and asked “who gave you the right to lay up with her anyway?” The colonel made it clear that the soldier would never obtain permission to marry the young woman.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Letter, James Bilotta to NAACP, 15 Jul 1948, folder Soldier Complaint “B,” Box II:G15 Part II Veterans Affairs File, 1940-1950; MS 34140 Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>129</sup> Letter, Robert Bennett to Mrs. Hazel Days, 16 Jul 1947 folder Soldier Complaint “B,” Box II:G15 Part II Veterans Affairs File, 1940-1950; MS 34140 Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Hollis Bright encountered a similar situation in France, as he applied to marry a white French woman. His application was turned down due to anti-miscegenation laws, and he wrote to the NAACP complaining, “as a soldier in the army of democracy I feel . . . that I have the right . . . to marry this young lady. Letter Hollis Bright to Walter White, 4 August 1945. Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. MS 34140. Part II Veterans Affairs File, 1940-1950. Box G15, Folder: Soldier Complaints “B.” Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. And copy of the statement from fiancé, Renee Secard to Captain Claude M. Stevens, 22 Feb 1945, “Application for permission to marry a French civilian.”

Some black troops succeeded in marrying European women and bringing them back to the U.S. Many had an easier time marrying darker complexioned women. Future Senator Edward Brooke served in the 92<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division. In Italy he met a young woman whom he described as having a complexion like that of his mother, a light-skinned black woman. Following the war, Brooke returned home and entered law school. Shortly thereafter, he arranged for the young woman to enter the United States where they married and had two children. He later described his Italian wife, as instrumental to his early political efforts. Other African American servicemen married women of color abroad and brought them back to the United States as well. One soldier married a young woman born in Martinique that he met in Paris.<sup>130</sup> Others married Anglo-Indian (mixed) women and brought them back to the United States.<sup>131</sup> Another married a young black woman from London. The couple moved to San Francisco, and three months later the bride declared she had enough, that there was something in this supposedly democratic country, an “insidious intangible, strength-sapping something that gets one down.”<sup>132</sup> Yet for black servicemen who managed to bring their white war brides back to the United States, they faced what Medgar Evers had feared—ostracism and oftentimes additional violence. Thirty states still had laws against interracial unions or cohabitation. In one

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<sup>130</sup> “French Bride of Tan Yank Arrives,” in *The Afro-American (1893-1988)*; Mar 30, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Baltimore Afro-American (1893-1988) p. 1.

<sup>131</sup> “Tan Vets Back with AngloIndian Wives: Army Consented to Nuptials After Meticulous Probe of Family Status,” in *Afro-American (1893-1988)*; Jun 1 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Baltimore Afro-American, p. 1.

<sup>132</sup> “3 Months of American Democracy Too Much for British War Bride,” in *Afro-American (1893-1988)*; Jun 8, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Baltimore Afro-American (1893-1988) p. 12.

instance, authorities in Virginia sentenced an African-American veteran and his British fiancé to six months in jail for unlawful co-habitation.<sup>133</sup>

The proliferation of mixed-race children presented a problem as well. A number of British welfare organizations reported problems finding placement for hundreds of mixed children fathered by black-American troops.<sup>134</sup> The British later condemned the American stance on the issue, accusing the Americans of sanctioning the births of illegitimate babies rather than allowing British women to marry African Americans, effectually making it Britain's problem.<sup>135</sup> On the homefront, white Americans vehemently rejected the admission of mixed race children into the United States. The Ku Klux Klan in Atlanta staged a letter writing campaign to congressmen demanding that they oppose the entry of these "illegitimate children."<sup>136</sup> Abandonment of mixed-race children became an issue in certain European countries. Many European women did not wish to be stigmatized for bearing "illegitimate" and/or African-American children. In Great Britain, authorities expected to bring many of the mixed-race children to Cardiff in Wales—the city with the largest black population in the country.<sup>137</sup> Many of the women were already married, and sometimes had to give the children to institutions if they planned to remain married. As a result, many mixed children went to welfare

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<sup>133</sup> Susan Zeigler, *Entangling Alliances: Foreign War Brides and American Soldiers in the Twentieth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 165-166.

<sup>134</sup> " 'Brown Babies' British Problem," in *The Pittsburgh Courier (1911-1950)*; Mar 2, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Pittsburgh Courier (1911-2002) p. 14.

<sup>135</sup> "Army Bars Mixed Marriages, Sanctions Illegitimate Babies! In *The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967)*; May 5, 1945. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975).

<sup>136</sup> "Klan Would Bar British Babies," in *The Pittsburgh Courier (1911-1950)*; May 17, 1947. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Pittsburgh Courier (1911-2002) p. 10.

<sup>137</sup> "British Bronzeville," *Ebony* July 1946, 45.

organizations in Great Britain.<sup>138</sup> Technical Sergeant William Hecht fathered a child with a married Englishwoman. When her husband returned to England after the war, they decided to remain together but give up the child, leaving the boy in the care of the Waifs and Strays Society. The soldier made the necessary arrangements to obtain a visa from the American Embassy in London and took steps to bring the child to the United States. Height even obtained a furlough to England in November 1945 to arrange transportation for his son. When everything seemed set, the Red Cross workers informed the soldier that the policy had changed that they could no longer send the boy to the U.S. With this communication, complained Height to the NAACP, the Red Cross had ceased responding to his letter and cablegrams.<sup>139</sup>

The proliferation of interracial relationships had a number of important repercussions. For African Americans like Medgar Evers, the experiences demonstrated the possibility of love, affection, or even friendship across racial boundaries. It humanized and made whiteness accessible in a way that American society previously denied African Americans. The experience opened certain freedoms and liberties that, in Evers' case, had previously been outside the realm of possibility. Society in the United States deemed interracial intimacy strictly off-limits, and many white American troops attempted to keep it a taboo and dangerous pastime for black troops in Europe as well. Interracial intimacy became the most public form of social activism during the time period.<sup>140</sup> At the end of World War II, most U.S. states prohibited interracial relationships. Soon afterward, laws began to change. In 1948, *Perez v. Sharp*, the California Supreme court declared that interracial bans on marriage violated the Fourteenth Amendment

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<sup>138</sup> "Britons Seek Solution Of 'Mulatto Babies' Problem," in *The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967)*; Mar 2, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975), p. 19.

<sup>139</sup> Letter, William Height to NAACP, 21 March 1946, folder 3, box II:G10; Part II Veterans Affairs File, 1940-1950; MS 34140 Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C

<sup>140</sup> Lubin, *Romance and Rights*, 96.

and allowed a white Mexican-American woman and an African-American man to wed. When African-American servicemen and their white German girlfriends frequented Wannasee Beach outside of Berlin, sunbathing on Sunday afternoons, or as they jitterbugged with Scottish women during the war, their actions resounded on both sides of the Atlantic.

The concerted efforts of the black press to disseminate this information also brought it to the consciousness of African Americans on the homefront. Journalists like Ollie Stewart of the *Afro-American* or Roi Ottley not only used the opportunity to protest anti-miscegenation laws and critique hypocrisy in the U.S. military, but to illustrate an alternative to the American view of black-white relations. When journalists showcased relationships between African Americans and white European women as normal, they disrupted the contemporary social constructions of race relations, depicting segregation as unnatural.<sup>141</sup>

These illustrations of interracial relationships spread into black literature of the 1940s and 1950s on the homefront as well. Chester Himes approached the subject in his 1945 novel, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*. In Himes' scenario, a group of African Americans discussed a union between a black man and a white woman. The black woman denounced the white woman as a tart, pointing out that only indecent white women married African-American men, and that no "self-respecting Negro man would marry one of these white tramps." Another young woman protested their treatment, as her own father married a white woman.<sup>142</sup> Many Americans held this notion—that the only white women who married black men were "trash." Even the British ministry made the point when discussing potential interracial relationships as African-American troops filtered into Great Britain. They noted that the British women dating African-American

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<sup>141</sup> Zeiger, *Entangling Alliances*, 177.

<sup>142</sup> Chester Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1945, 1986), 85

soldiers were by no means respectable young ladies. Himes observed that African Americans possessed some of the same ingrained ideas. Yet he critiqued this sort of consciousness, demonstrating the absurdities of the conversation on interracial intimacy. One young woman shouted in a “wild and agitated manner” that “Nobody but a white tramp would marry a nigger!”<sup>143</sup> Himes bared certain taboos embedded in the American consciousness, exhibiting the absurdities of the prejudices against interracial intimacy in his characters’ actions.

Other writers broached the subject of interracial intimacy as well. Ralph Ellison’s nameless narrator in the 1952 novel *Invisible Man* had sexual liaisons with numerous white women. In Ellison’s book, the narrator’s exoticism and “otherness” attracted the white women. The issue crept into the public sphere during the war and in the postwar period. The public relationships between African-American troops abroad and white European women brought interracial intimacy to the attention of the American public as never before. It challenged the prevailing American and black consciousnesses as servicemen openly exhibited these relationships and demonstrated the possibility of love or sex across the colorline. In addition, the black press’ campaign to disseminate these ideas raised a previously taboo subject in a politically savvy way.

The press played up the relationship between black men and white women, playing down the reverse. It is likely that the pairing of white men and black women was less common, especially as many of these relationships took place between black servicemen and local women. One WAC captain in Europe recalled that she never heard of intermarriages between black WACS and French or Englishmen, though she heard rumors of such relationships.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, 85-86.

<sup>144</sup> Mary F. Kearney, interview by L.D. Reddick, 25 Mar 1946, folder 1/14, Lawrence D. Reddick Project, SCRBC, NYPL.

Relationships between white men and black women were less politically powerful. If contemporary relationships represented a power dynamic in which males were dominant, interracial intimacy between a white man and a black women still privileged the power of the white man. Relationships between black men and white women, however, turned this traditional hierarchy on its head. Newspapers and reports focused on these black male relationships, reconstructing ideas of normalcy in intimate relations and playing up a certain power dynamic privileging the African-American male—emphasizing their capabilities, desirability, and rebuilding of black masculinity.

Their time abroad introduced African-American troops to new interactions with white people. The experiences of both interacting cordially with the white European population, both allies and enemies, and the contentious encounters with white American troops gave many men new perspectives. In 1937, writer Richard Wright explained, “My first lesson in how to live as a Negro came when I was quite small.” He and his group of friends, young African-American boys, engaged some white boys in a street battle. As Wright and his friends retreated, a broken milk bottle caught him behind one ear, opening a gash. He later related the incident to his mother, expecting her sympathy. Instead, Wright received a slap and some sharp orders: “I was never under any conditions, to fight *white* folks again. And they were absolutely right in clouting me with the broken milk bottle.” Wright argued that African Americans possessed a certain type of consciousness, a “Jim Crow education.” In order to survive in the U.S., black Americans played a certain role and inhabited a subordinate place.<sup>145</sup> Every facet of life, from

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<sup>145</sup> Richard Wright, “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow, an Autobiographical Sketch” in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, General Editors (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 1389.

the black church to segregated schools, was forced upon them from without, and formed the basis for this brand of American consciousness.

African Americans in the U.S. were imbued with a Jim Crow education, and they had absorbed a certain consciousness that allowed them to survive, forced upon them by the dominant white order. While they certainly recognized the injustice, perhaps many were unaware how deeply ingrained certain American ideas and prejudices were. As they moved abroad and experienced new environments and cultures, leaving behind the restraints of the American institutions and structures, the backwards nature of the American system struck many of them forcibly. The contradiction of fighting for democracy as their own countrymen belittled them also broke the spell, especially placed in stark contrast with their treatment by white Europeans. As Isham Benton, POW in Italy and Germany, said, his time in Europe changed the way he looked at the world and at people. “I knew more about the world, wasn’t so naive anymore.” Benton admitted that if he had not served, he would never have learned these things about himself and other people.<sup>146</sup>

Not every serviceman underwent profound changes in their time abroad, nor did black troops have uniformly positive experiences with different cultures. Yet many could point to something they learned or took away from their time in the military. Soldier John Curtis Foster of the 370<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment speculated that he grew up a great deal during the war—the anxiety gave him a “certain discipline of spirit. I seemed to be more patient and more tolerant of the people around me.”<sup>147</sup> Some emerged with new confidence, a different conception of

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<sup>146</sup>Isham Benton, interview by Douglas Clanin, not dated, Isham George Benton Collection (AFC/2001/001/9170) Veterans History Project, American Folklife Collection, Library of Congress.

<sup>147</sup>John Curtis Foster, Jr., *Memoirs: Buffalo Soldiers 92<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division World War II Stories*, John Curtis Foster, Jr. Collection (AFC/2001/001/56300) Veterans History Project, American Folklife Collection, Library of Congress.

democracy, broadened horizons, or even a heightened sense of anger. With white American ire so often directed at black servicemen, many returned with a confused sense of identity, curious why they risked their lives to defend a country that failed to recognize them. At the end of Richard Wright's *Native Son*, the state put the protagonist, Bigger Thomas, to death for his crimes. Throughout the story, he struggled to develop a nascent form of consciousness that never quite reached fruition. Without this consciousness, Thomas could not survive. W.E.B. Du Bois made a similar point about the importance of education as a liberating force.<sup>148</sup>

The Second World War sounded a wakeup call for many African-American servicemen. It is not that they passively acquiesced to the situation on the homefront previously. Rather, without exposure to a broader realm of experience it was difficult to gauge the extent to which the U.S. limited democratic freedoms on the homefront. In order to engage in the struggle back home, they needed a more expansive understanding of the problems in the U.S., and how the rest of the world approached race. Exposure to new places, people, and culture, greater freedom to love and live, and a stark exposure of the outrageous hypocrisy of white America—fighting a war for freedom and democracy—all fostered a new form of consciousness within many African-American servicemen. As troops received their discharges at the end of the war and moved from Europe to the U.S., on some few occasions with white brides in tow, they brought an enlightened sense of purpose and a determination to fight back to the homefront.

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<sup>148</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, in *W.E.B. Du Bois: Writings* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 1986), 587.

Chapter 3  
Survival of the Fittest: African-American Troops in the Pacific, Dismantling White  
Supremacy

As I was getting on the line to eat, this white Sergeant tells me that I couldn't eat now 'cause the white K.P.s were going to eat. Just why he told me that I don't know, but I jumped on him. I asked him what did he say? And he repeated it again. Then I was burning up—so I said to him—“look you white \_\_\_\_\_ who in the \_\_\_\_\_ do you think you are by telling me I can't eat now! Only the white ones could eat? Sister, I told him everything I could tell him. I said I was going overseas, to fight so I [could] just as well die right here.” If I had a knife or a gun, I would have killed him.<sup>1</sup>

The young corporal had recently arrived in the Philippines. “I am now the farthest from home of any of mother's children,” he reflected, as he recalled passing Saipan where his closest brother was stationed. “You can imagine how sick of grief that I was . . . far and yet so near.” In charge of kitchen patrol, the soldier lined up the men at mealtime and served the food as they filed past. With the line in motion, he generally stopped to eat and then re-cycled in line, taking another server's place. Everyone ate and the serving line kept moving. The system functioned smoothly, he vented, until that day. Black and white American troops in the Pacific clashed with a frequency and intensity uncommon in other parts of the world. The complex race war against the Japanese and the presence of allies of all races disrupted black and white American racial hierarchies. As white American troops sought to reestablish the social conventions of the homefront, African-American troops disputed their claims to power. The addition of other racial groups generally considered inferior in the U.S. only complicated matters. Each group struggled

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<sup>1</sup> Letter, Randy to Sister, not dated, folder 1/4 Reddick Letters from Servicemen during and after World War II, Includes Correspondence with Dwight D. Eisenhower, Lawrence D. Reddick World War II Project, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (SCRBC), The New York Public Library (NYPL).

to find a place within this strange and unformed social structure, simultaneously battling with their own conceptions of identity and democracy.

Black troops in the Pacific encountered some situations similar to those in Europe. They faced white American discrimination and violence, as white Americans belittled them before the rest of the world. Competition over women in less remote areas also spurred conflict in places like Guam and the Philippines. As in Europe, black troops left the war with new worldviews. In the Pacific, however, rather than just the expansion of cultural horizons, they returned to the United States angry because of the intensity of the racial struggle. The constant attempts to superimpose an American racial hierarchy in the Pacific grated on black troops, and without the hospitality black troops in Britain and France had received, a volatile situation emerged. They simultaneously had to contend with others within the hierarchy for rank. African Americans in the Pacific resented that the military relegated them to menial labor. Unlike combat troops in Europe, these men had no second chance to prove their worth. In the Navy, men in the stewards' branch had more combat experience than designated combat units in the Army, and like those in Europe they found that combat minimized arbitrary racial boundaries. Men in the Pacific had no uniform experience. Some changed because they saw more of the world and began to understand the myth of white supremacy. Others felt the hypocrisy of serving in a segregated military of democracy keenly and let their frustration or anger spur their determination for change. Those African Americans who served in the Pacific dealt with a crisis of identity. As white Americans and others challenged their American-ness, black troops simultaneously toiled to reassert their national identity and carve out space in an unfamiliar racial structure.

Throughout the Pacific, black troops had a range of experiences. In each service they performed different roles and support for a variety of operations in the Pacific. For those in the

Army, they found their chances to participate in combat stymied at every turn, never receiving another opportunity to prove their mettle. In the Marine Corps, the majority of black marines landed in non-combat support roles, though they participated directly in combat activities. For those marines designated combat units, the Corps placed them in secondary roles, out of direct action. In the Navy as well, the majority of black troops labored in the stewards' branch though their duties often placed them directly in combat situations. They worked and fought in much closer proximity to white sailors than in some other branches. The experience of combat again leveled the playing field as black and white troops cooperated to perform their missions and support other American servicemen, regardless of color. Yet in relegating them to labor and support units, the military sent the clear message about the value and faith it placed in their abilities, even with demonstrations to the contrary. As black troops attempted to establish themselves as competent and American, racial tensions escalated and violent clashes ensued across the theater. Despite these tensions, African-American troops occasionally manifested American attitudes and understandings in the Pacific as they sought to find their place among non-American racial "others." This chapter explores the range of interracial interactions in the Pacific Theater, and how those interactions affected the African-American understandings of whiteness, of their own identities, and American internationalism.

Historian John Dower described the Pacific conflict as a race war. Americans perceived the Japanese as particularly savage and treacherous. Although they attributed Germany atrocities to the prevalence of Nazism, many looked upon Japanese atrocity as a national characteristic. United States war coverage branded the war in the Pacific as more brutal than that in Europe, intimating that this was a kill or be killed, take no prisoners sort of fight. The press directed more attention to brutality directed at Americans rather than German viciousness against Eastern

Europeans and Jews—groups that many Americans considered undesirable. Japan and the United States engaged in a fierce conflict in the Pacific. Both countries suffered very high death tolls at places such as Okinawa, Peleliu, and Iwo Jima. The Japanese also directed more brutality toward American prisoners than the Germans. As the conflict in the Pacific stretched on, the Japanese refused to surrender and the Americans lost interest in taking prisoners. Animosity fed atrocity, and an intense racial hatred on both sides in the Pacific led to violent racial battles as the Americans pressed forward.<sup>2</sup>

With the introduction of African-American troops in the Pacific, the dynamic became even more complex. For the most part, as in the European Theater, these units had little chance to participate in combat operations. Most served in labor units, and the few combat units had little chance to perform their designated functions. They waited in staging areas in the U.S. or abroad for combat assignments, and oftentimes theater commanders rejected their presence.<sup>3</sup> The 93<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division moved overseas to Guadalcanal in 1944 where it split up and dispersed throughout the Pacific. Elements of the division, and the attached 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, entered combat in the Allied operations at Bougainville. Since their deployment in 1942, the men of the 24<sup>th</sup> had performed service duty in the Pacific, loading and unloading ships, guarding air bases, and building roads.<sup>4</sup> One soldier in the 24<sup>th</sup> wondered “that they did not designate us the 24<sup>th</sup> stevedores.”<sup>5</sup> White commanding officers contended that in its first month

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<sup>2</sup> John Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race & Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 10-11, 33-36.

<sup>3</sup> Ulysses Lee, *The Employment of Negro Troops* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1966), 446.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 497.

<sup>5</sup> Bill Stevens, interview by Mary Penick Motley, *The Invisible Soldier: The Experience of the Black soldier, World War II* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1975), 76.

in action, the 24<sup>th</sup> lacked the efficiency and initiative for successful action. They also reported that “patrols tended to be excessively timid when there was a possibility of receiving Japanese fire.”<sup>6</sup> General Oscar Griswold, commander of the XIV Corps, noted that the 24<sup>th</sup> was no more trigger happy than any other organization in its baptism of fire. As the men’s confidence increased and the regiment received additional assignments, commanding officers mentioned the improvement and admitted that the regiment generally performed well.<sup>7</sup> Units like the 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment spent much of their time moving from island to island, relieving parts of other white divisions headed forward to engage the Japanese. African-American combat units took over their positions, now rear areas, loaded and unloaded ships, and killed or captured Japanese stragglers. The units carried out essential duties, though not those a line infantry unit usually performed.<sup>8</sup>

As in Europe, white authorities used these initial problems to make a case for black ineptitude. In their reports, commanders indicated a number of problems—the aforementioned timidity, inferior mental capacity, frequent disorder, and lack of initiative. Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy contended to Secretary of War Henry Stimson that despite these limitations, the War Department should continue to employ black combat units. Early reports indicated problems with the 99<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadron as well, argued McCloy, and that unit now performed admirably. More time and effort would make the men of the 93<sup>rd</sup> an effective asset as well.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Brief, Colonel Pasco to McCloy, 27 May, 1944, box 15, entry 47; John J. McCloy, Formerly Security Classified Correspondence; Office of the Secretary of War, RG 107; National Archives at College Park (NACP).

<sup>7</sup> Lee, *The Employment of Negro Troops*, 502-504.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 516.

<sup>9</sup> John J. McCloy, “Memorandum for Colonel Stimson,” 1 June 1944, box 15, entry 47; John J. McCloy, Formerly Security Classified Correspondence; Office of the Secretary of War, RG 107; National Archives at College Park, NACP.

Stimson responded: “Noted—But I do not believe they can be turned into really effective combat troops without all officers being white. This is indicated by many of the incidents herein.”<sup>10</sup> Unlike the 99<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadron, the men attached to the 93<sup>rd</sup> received no additional opportunities to improve their combat efficiency. African-American infantry regiments in the Pacific subsequently conducted minor tactical missions, labor, and security duties. The 93<sup>rd</sup> soon became responsible for the control and coordination of all labor and transportation for the 8<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Armies. Men worked security, stocked warehouse, and conducted patrols. Their patrols aimed to prevent the remaining Japanese forces from consolidating, but the Army kept the 93<sup>rd</sup> from heavier fighting. Yet while the 93<sup>rd</sup> only encountered minor action, it remained important to the undermanned Pacific operations.<sup>11</sup>

Black marines had a similar experience. The Corps designated the initial Montford Point recruits as the 51<sup>st</sup> and 52<sup>nd</sup> Defense Battalions to defend overseas bases. The majority of black marines, however, served in service units termed ammunition or depot companies. These defense battalions ended up in the Eniwetok Atoll and the Marshall Islands respectively and experienced limited action. One evening as the men of the 51<sup>st</sup> watched a movie, the film stopped and the men were alerted of a “Condition Red: Japanese Aircraft were on the way.” A member of the battalion recalled, “I never saw such jubilation in my life, for everyone responded eagerly.”<sup>12</sup> Another remembered that “they were disappointed they didn’t actually get into

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<sup>10</sup> Memo, Henry Stimson to John J. McCloy, 5 June 1944 box 15, entry 47; John J. McCloy, Formerly Security Classified Correspondence; Office of the Secretary of War, RG 107; National Archives at College Park, NACP. Incidentally the 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment was the only black unit with all white officers. Lee, *The Employment of Negro Troops*, 498.

<sup>11</sup> Lee, *The Employment of Negro Troops*, 517, 523-526.

<sup>12</sup> Bernard C. Nalty, *The Right to Fight: African American Marines in World War II* (Washington, D.C.: History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps: Supt. Of Docs., U.S.G.P.O., distributor, 1995), the 51<sup>st</sup> Defense Battalion at War. Available at <  
[http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online\\_books/npswapa/extContent/usmc/pcn-190-003132-00/sec6.htm](http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online_books/npswapa/extContent/usmc/pcn-190-003132-00/sec6.htm).

combat. That was what they really wanted.”<sup>13</sup> One man remarked that the military had no intention of having any black heroes in combat, as only supply troops pulled into the fray incidentally saw any action.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, the ammunition and depot companies experienced more action than the defense battalions. In June 1944 the first black ammunition companies hit the beaches with the white marines and dug in. Black marines landed in support of the 4<sup>th</sup> Marine Division as depot companies stayed on ships, moving cargo from holds into landing crafts. One white commanding officer described the situation as his company unloaded supplies at Saipan: “mortar shells were still raining down as my boys unloaded ammunition, demolition material, and other supplies from amphibious trucks. . . . They stood waist deep in the surf unloading boats as vital supplies of food and water were brought in.”<sup>15</sup> Master Sergeant Turner Blount recalled that they kept the front lines supplied day and night. They dug in, sleeping in foxholes and guarding trucks around the clock to protect drivers and supplies from ambushes.<sup>16</sup> After Saipan, the Marine Commandant remarked that “The Negro Marines are no longer on trial. They are Marines, period.”<sup>17</sup> *Time Magazine* reported that the black marines performed well at Saipan, and when the 4<sup>th</sup> Marine Division received the Presidential Unit Citation for combat on Saipan and Tinian, the African-American units shared the award.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Henry I. Shaw, Jr. and Ralph W. Donnelly, *Blacks in the Marine Corps* (Washington, D.C.: History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1975), 21.

<sup>14</sup>Lawrence Hayes, interview by L.D. Reddick, 18 Mar 1946, folder 1/10, Lawrence D. Reddick World War II Project, SCRBC, NYPL.

<sup>15</sup>Shaw and Donnelly, *Blacks in the Marine Corps*, 32-33.

<sup>16</sup>McLaurin, *The Marines of Montford Point: America's First Black Marines* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 123.

<sup>17</sup>Shaw and Donnelly, *Blacks in the Marine Corps*, 35.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid, 35.

Despite these commendations, the attitudes in the Marine Corps often mirrored those in other branches. In their reports, the Navy's Committee on Negro Personnel noted that the commanding officer of the 51<sup>st</sup> Defense Battalion described African Americans as unsuited for anti-aircraft artillery because of their "emotional instability and lack of appreciation of the material, and that only at an unreasonable expense in maintenance of equipment due to low intelligence and mechanical aptitude would the unit be more than a very mediocre Defense Battalion." Furthermore, they reported that African Americans lacked a sense of responsibility, abused the equipment, mislaid and lost tools. Black marines demonstrated an "outstanding lack of interest to better themselves," they concluded.<sup>19</sup> The Marine Corps demonstrated no greater propensity for change than other branches.

Notwithstanding an official lack of confidence in their abilities, African-American units went on to support the invasion of Guam in the Marianas, unloading supplies then working in onshore dumps moving supplies and ammunition to the front lines while evacuating the wounded. They participated in the invasion of Peleliu, where the 11<sup>th</sup> Depot Company suffered the highest casualty rates of any black marine unit in the war. Those men at Peleliu received many commendations for their performance.<sup>20</sup> Only seven of twelve ammunition companies and twelve of fifty-one depot companies saw combat in the Marine Corps. Other black marines in the Pacific labored, performed guard duties, and kept the supply lines moving.<sup>21</sup> Supplies in the Pacific needed to move vast distances to reach the front. Logistics were crucial. The Pacific

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<sup>19</sup> Memo to Capt. R.H. Hillenkoetter, USN, Senior Member, Committee on Negro Personnel. "Negro Personnel in the Marine Corps." 24 May 1945, folder "reports from Members of Secretary's Committee," box 8, entry 131-S; UnderSecretary of the Navy James Forrestal Correspondence Relating to Meetings of Top Policy Group, 1944-1947; General Records of the Department of the Navy, RG 80; NACP.

<sup>20</sup> Shaw and Donnelly, *Blacks in the Marine Corps*, 35-37.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 44.

War relied just as much on engineering as naval and amphibious operations. Yet oftentimes Allied commanders opted for combat units or supplies instead of engineering or construction units, leading to insufficient numbers of service troops.<sup>22</sup>

Most of the U.S. Navy also fought in the Pacific. Although the Navy opened its ranks to African Americans for general service in 1942, most black sailors remained in the messman's (steward's in 1943) branch until later in the war. From 1942 to 1943 the numbers of African Americans in the Navy expanded rapidly, from just over five-thousand African Americans in mid-1942 to over twenty thousand by the beginning of 1943. Still, over two-thirds belonged to the messmen's branch (18,227). Over six-thousand others enlisted for general service with more than a third of that number in the Seabees, the engineering and construction organization of the service.<sup>23</sup> The numbers continued climbing as new prospects opened up in the Navy and as the President pressed the service to increase its equal opportunity efforts. Yet African Americans only constituted about 2% of the entire Navy, and with most in the steward's branch, Roosevelt questioned the Navy's commitment to accepting African Americans for general service.<sup>24</sup> The proportions shifted, however, and by mid-1945 about 45% of African Americans in the Navy served in the steward's branch.<sup>25</sup>

When the Navy opened up general enlistment in 1942, it assumed that no African-American sailors (outside of the steward's branch), regardless of their specialty, would serve in

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<sup>22</sup> Ronald H. Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun: The American War with Japan* (London: Cassell & Co., 1984), 299.

<sup>23</sup> Bureau of Naval Personnel, *The Negro in the Navy: United States Naval Administrative History of World War II #84*, First Draft Narrative Prepared by the Historical Section, Bureau of Naval Personnel. Naval History and Heritage Command, The Navy Department Library, Washington Navy Yard, Washington, D.C. pg. 10.

<sup>24</sup> Nalty, *Strength For the Fight*, 189.

<sup>25</sup> Bureau of Naval Personnel, *The Negro in the Navy: United States Naval Administrative History of World War II #84*, 1947, p. 6-10; Naval History and Heritage Command Library, Washington, D.C.

the fleet. With this restriction, the Navy could maintain segregation and limit the authority of African-American petty officers to subordinates of their own race. By April of the next year, the Navy had discovered that assigning all African Americans in general service to shore duty was problematic. The Navy Bureau of Personnel found that concentrating black sailors on shore duty generated both black and white resentment. Instead, the service considered including African Americans in ship repair units.<sup>26</sup> It did not implement limited forms of integration, however, until Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal's experiments later in the war. Yet the Navy did commission a new destroyer, the USS *Mason*, and a submarine chaser, the USS *PC-1264* in 1944, and manned both with African-American enlisted men under white officers.<sup>27</sup> The men on these ships generally had positive experiences, greater opportunity and operational successes led to greater morale. Before the ships converted to all-black crews, however, the Navy made white officers sign agreements to accept the assignment without prejudice.<sup>28</sup> Lieutenant Commander William Blackford of Seattle captained the *Mason*, and many in the crew noted, "We would have followed him to hell and back."<sup>29</sup> Blackford reportedly said that he regarded his "ship to be just like the hundreds of destroyers on the high seas, not as a problem child nor as an experiment. I am not a crusader, and I am not trying to solve the race problem. I am simply trying to run a good fighting ship."<sup>30</sup> While some evidence existed that certain white petty officers disliked the

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 40-41.

<sup>27</sup> Mary Pat Kelly, *Proudly We Served: The Men of the USS Mason* (Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute, 1999), 42-43.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 58. The white officers signed agreements saying they accepted the assignments freely and would not discriminate in their commands.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Kelley, *Proudly We Served*, 55.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 54.

*Mason* and accepted duty aboard it hoping for rapid career advancement, the USS *Mason* crew performed their tasks competently in the North Atlantic.<sup>31</sup>

Likewise, those on subchaser *PC-1264* generally had a positive experience as the ship patrolled the coast of the United States and the Caribbean. Samuel L. Gravely, later the Navy's first black admiral, graduated from the Navy's V-12 college training program and received his commission in December 1944. After a short stint at Camp Robert Smalls, he reported to *PC-1264* to relieve a white officer. The ship's captain, Eric Purdon, had worked to advance black senior petty officers, replacing the whites initially in those positions, a process intended though rarely practiced with African-American units. Gravely recalled feeling "truly welcomed aboard that ship. . . . The first time in my Navy experience that I had the feeling of being at home. That was from the top down."<sup>32</sup>

The majority of African-American sailors had vastly different experiences. Stewards in the fleet did not have the opportunity for advancement, specialization, or even to change their occupation once general service opened. They did, however, participate in combat operations. The stewards' experiences in the fleet varied with the individuals and ships, but men in the branch participated in every major battle in the Pacific. Messman Lloyd Prewitt served on the USS *Lexington* (CV-2). On May 8, 1942, when the carrier came under attack, taking two torpedoes and a bomb on the main deck, Prewitt worked as a duty cook instead of his usual general quarters post in the ammunition room. A torpedo had spread gasoline, which ignited and led to explosions aboard the carrier.<sup>33</sup> Prewitt avoided the brunt of the torpedo hits, though ten

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<sup>31</sup> Bureau of Naval Personnel, *The Negro in the Navy: United States Naval Administrative History of World War II #84*, 1947, p. 43; Naval History and Heritage Command Library, Washington, D.C.

<sup>32</sup> Samuel L. Gravely, Jr., with Paul Stillwell, *Trailblazer: The U.S. Navy's First Black Admiral* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2010), 23-24.

<sup>33</sup> Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun*, 161-162.

men from his group remained trapped below deck, going down with the carrier. Prewitt remembered the crew abandoning the ship, moving to the flight deck while the division officer mustered everyone, and then the men went over the side. “There was no racial segregation,” said Prewitt. “There were knotted lines reaching down to the water. I went down the rope and stayed in the water for about forty-five minutes. There was a current that I was afraid would pull me under the ship. But a motor whaleboat from the destroyer finally got me.”<sup>34</sup>

Elvin Bell, a messman from New York, later received the Navy and Marine Corps Medal, only one of five enlisted recipients of the two thousand men on the *Lexington*. A white officer later reported that a black mess attendant, who he never considered much good, insisted on going back into a dangerous section of the ship to rescue friends. Bell returned with injured sailors and second degree burns. He had entered the most dangerous section of the stricken carrier, according to the official citation: an area “frequented by violent exploding of gasoline vapor and ammunition.” There, he assisted injured personnel trapped below decks with “utter disregard for his own safety.”<sup>35</sup>

David Parker Barnes, stewards mate first class, served aboard the USS *Yorktown* (CV-10), and remembered combat more than segregation. Barnes entered the messman’s branch in 1939 and served on the *Yorktown* until its sinking at the Battle of Midway.<sup>36</sup> As a high-ranking steward, Barnes worked in the captain’s quarters. Following torpedo strikes at Midway, the crew abandoned the ship and American destroyers picked up the men to transfer them to larger cruisers. Two days later, the *Yorktown* remained afloat. A skeleton crew returned to the

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<sup>34</sup> Miller, *The Messman Chronicles*, 219.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 220-222.

<sup>36</sup> USS *Yorktown* (CV-5), 1937-1942, Overview and Special Image Selection. Naval History and Heritage Command, Online Library of Selected Images: U.S. Navy Ships. <http://www.history.navy.mil/photos/sh-usn/usnsh-xz/cv5.htm>

*Yorktown* aboard the destroyer, USS *Hammann* in an attempt to salvage the carrier. The captain requested that Barnes return with the group to recover some items from his quarters. Barnes recalled that the deck of the carrier was too slick to wear shoes. That afternoon, more torpedoes hit the two ships—most hit the *Hammann*. The destroyer sank within minutes, said Barnes. It was an eerie scene, he continued, watching the *Hammann* sink, the empty *Yorktown*, and Japanese subs circling in the water, surfacing to survey the wreckage. Almost half the men on the *Hammann* died or went missing in the explosion. The Americans sank the *Yorktown* shortly afterwards.<sup>37</sup>

Another mess attendant on the *Yorktown*, Thomas Allen, remembered the panicked feeling as the first torpedoes hit the carrier. Below decks with some other sailors, they found their way blocked by some temporary repairs made on the ship after damage at the Battle of the Coral Sea. “I was hyperventilating and about to pass out . . . but I took a deep breath,” said Allen, and recalled another route up. Later, in the water as the men waited for the destroyers to pick them up, something fell off the carrier and hit a man near Allen, knocking the sailor out. As Allen swam to him and held up his head, others in the water called for a life raft to take the wounded man on board.<sup>38</sup>

James White started his naval career as a fireman, though at sea he found he did not like the engine room. He asked to be a cook and was transferred to the stewards’ branch. I “liked

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<sup>37</sup> David Parker Barnes, Jr., interview by Shannon Harshbarger, David Parker Barnes, Jr. Collection (AFC/2001/001/27781), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; Battle of Midway: 4-7 June 1942, Online Action Reports: Commanding Officer, USS *Hammann*, Serial 2 of 16 June 1942. Commanding Officer, USS *Hammann* to Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet, “Action Report; 4-6 June, 1942. Department of the Navy, Navy Historical Center, Washington, D.C., <http://www.history.navy.mil/docs/wwii/mid9.htm>.

<sup>38</sup> Miller, *The Messman Chronicles*, 227-228.

being with my own people,” said White.<sup>39</sup> Others in the stewards’ branch resented rudeness and mistreatment from white sailors, and the service duties of the stewards’ mates. Harold Ward began serving on the USS *San Francisco* in 1940. He enlisted at eighteen to get away from a home full of great aunt matriarchs. “I was an angry kid,” he remembered, and in boot camp he discovered that “I was less than nothing and the only thing an African American could be in the Navy was a servant.” Many, like Ward, complained that the recruiters misled black recruits, early in the war, failing to disclose that African Americans could only serve in the messman’s branch. “So I fought a whole war angry, not so much at the Japanese. But I was angry at my country, because all they would let me do was shine shoes and make a bed.” Ward felt that white sailors did not find him acceptable as a steward because they disliked his attitude. One morning a white officer cursed at him as Ward served the man. Ward stopped working, and was sent to the executive officer. They “made me captain of the head” as a punishment, said Ward. “That was fine,” he continued; “I didn’t have to look at them anymore.” So he cleaned the head and his shipmate’s bunks.<sup>40</sup>

Otto Tranberg of St. Croix, Virgin Islands, spent much of his youth sailing and doing other technical odd jobs. When he enlisted in the Navy in 1942, he hoped to work on engines, but the Navy sent him to be a steward. “I resented it,” Tranberg protested. “Because some of your officers would tell you, I want the toilet paper fixed just like this. I want my shoes turned that way. And I wouldn’t do it.” A Virgin Islander, Tranberg had different racial experiences than the men from the mainland. His outspokenness got him in trouble. “I was a grown man,”

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<sup>39</sup> James Abner White, interview by Walter Valentine, James A. White Collection (AFC 2001/001/41836) Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

<sup>40</sup> Harold E. Ward, interview by Stephanie Hollister, Harold E. Ward Collection (AFC 2001/001/76010) Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

he remembered, “and somebody says boy bring me a glass of water.” Tranberg rebelled in little ways, like throwing out the captain’s wife’s recipe cards when she insisted that he cook new foods. He recalled frequent fights between black and white sailors in Puerto Rico, and he fought a shore patrolman who struck a black shipmate. For that scuffle, Tranberg lost his rating.<sup>41</sup>

African Americans served on submarines in small numbers as well, beginning after World War I. At that time, both African Americans and Filipinos served as mess attendants, but the numbers of Asian-American messmen in the Pacific declined sharply during the Second World War. Many felt that Asians resembled one another too closely and feared infiltration by the Japanese.<sup>42</sup> Robert Coley entered the Navy in 1942 and found himself “shanghaied” into the submarine service. As the only African American on the USS *Tambor* (SS-198), Cooley recalled that overall, “we were out there on patrol and you did your duty. Ninety percent of the time it was fine,” though there were always a few who made race an issue. He stayed in the submarine service for another twenty-five years.<sup>43</sup>

Eddie Robinson enlisted at seventeen, a “patriot burning with a desire to smite the little bastards who dared fire on the flag of my country.” He delivered an ultimatum to his mother—sign for him or he planned to run away. Later, said Robinson, “there were times I wished she had locked me in the closet and thrown the key away, but who is more worldly wise than a teenager approaching maturity?” After training in Bainbridge, Maryland, Robinson volunteered for submarine duty and shipped out to Hawaii to train and pick up his first ship, the USS *Thresher* (SS-200). At about 5’4” and a hundred pounds dripping wet, Robinson was a natural

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<sup>41</sup> Otto Tranberg, interview by Jean Picou, 7 December 2007, Otto Tranberg Collection (AFC 2001/001/73027) Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

<sup>42</sup> Miller, *The Messman Chronicles*, 202-203, 225.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 205-206.

for submarines. He recalled his first day with clarity. As he “strutted down to the *Thresher*” and prepared to board, a “great big white seaman” looked down and bellowed, “And who’s your mother, little boy? The battle flag was hoisted and 100 pounds of fighting, flaying fury, charged into him headfirst.” The big sailor sidestepped, grabbed Robinson by the seat of his pants and dropped him “unceremoniously in the drink.” Robinson swam to the dock and marched back for a repeat performance. As he climbed aboard yet again, Robinson stuck his nose in the air, and “my big friend grabbed me, tossed me up in the air, shook my hand, and we were buddies from then on.” One night out in Honolulu, Robinson’s white friend became angry when a “house of iniquity” declined to serve African Americans. With much of the *Thresher*’s crew nearby, the sailors “made a shambles of the joint.”<sup>44</sup>

Like men in other branches, African-American sailors experienced a variety of interactions with white servicemen. Oftentimes in combat conditions, race became less important than survival. Every sailor played a role on a ship and manned a battle station. Henry Clay Howard, an African-American machinist mate, loved the time he spent in the Navy. For him, segregation vanished aboard ship. It was not possible to keep men separate as in other services. Sailors had to show up wherever they were assigned. He suggested that naval service fostered a nearness; if the man next to you “broke wind you smelled it.”<sup>45</sup> At the same time, with African Americans often relegated to service duties, resentments formed easily. The forced proximity made it necessary to coexist and cooperate, however. This put the Navy in a position to integrate sooner than the other branches. It also contained smaller numbers of black servicemen than the Army.

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<sup>44</sup> Eddie Will Robinson, interview by Motley, *The Invisible Soldier*, 111-112.

<sup>45</sup> Henry Clay Howard, interview by Walter Valentine, Henry Clay Howard Collection (AFC 2001/001/16244) Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

In 1944, Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal implemented some small-scale experiments with integration. With the help of the admittedly skeptical Admiral Ernest King, the Chief of Naval Operations, the Navy assigned African Americans to twenty-five large fleet auxiliaries. A skilled administrator, Forrestal enlisted the help of King, the Bureau of Naval Personnel, and other high-ranking naval officers. As King conceded after a conversation with Forrestal, “a democracy ought to have a democratic Navy.” Though believing that the experiments had little chance of success, King promised his support and that of the Bureau. Admiral King had commanders implement equality of treatment in training, promotions, and duty assignments, impressing upon white crew members that African-American sailors should receive fair treatment. King left matters of berthing to ship commanders, and the experiment went smoothly. Commanders berthed African Americans without regard to color and the men integrated without conflict. Cooks and stewards became eligible for all commissary branches, and segregation in specialist training programs came to an end. By spring 1945, King began making provisions to distribute African-American personnel to all auxiliary vessels though with a ten percent quota still in effect for the Navy. Yet for all this, by V-J Day, with a very small percentage of African Americans in the active duty Navy, the service seemed in danger of resuming old habits.<sup>46</sup>

Despite the importance of these support roles, black troops strove to be included in combat operations, and like the marine defense battalions, desperate for action. In addition to the boredom and isolation on the islands, they struggled for inclusion because of the implications of

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<sup>46</sup> Morris J. MacGregor, Jr., *Integration of the Armed Forces 1940-1965* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History United States Army, 1985) 85-86, 98. The majority of active-duty African Americans were still in the stewards branch, and for those reservists who remained in the reduced postwar Navy, they would have to compete with white regulars and reservists for postwar billets and commissions. Before the end of the war, neither Forrestal nor the Bureau of Personnel did much to address the postwar employment of black troops.

combat duty. If one could fight for democracy abroad, one could demand equal treatment back home. For those black servicemen who participated in combat, the designation of labor or support troops belied the importance of their roles. In 1945, poet Gwendolyn Brooks addressed the issue of inclusion. She wrote in a poem for Dorie Miller, the black steward who won the Navy Cross for heroism in the Pearl Harbor attack:

Still—am I good enough to die for them, is my blood  
    bright enough to be spilled,  
Was my constant back-question—are they clear  
On this? Or do I intrude even now?  
Am I clean enough to kill for them, do they wish me to kill  
For them or is my place while death licks his lips and  
    strides to them  
In the galley still?

Naturally, the important thing is, I helped to save them,  
    them and a part of their democracy.  
Even if I had to kick their law into their teeth in order  
    to do that for them.  
And I am feeling well and settled in myself because I  
    Believe it was a good job,  
Despite this possible horror: that they might prefer the  
Preservation of their law in all its sick dignity and their  
    knives  
To the continuation of their creed  
And their lives.<sup>47</sup>

Indeed, for many black servicemen, it seemed as if they were fighting their own country rather than with the Japanese. Black and white American troops clashed repeatedly. Although combat might level the playing field, the truce ended with the enemy out of sight. As in Europe, white American troops harassed black troops, trying to impose an American racial hierarchy abroad. In Guam, once the battle for the island ended, racial tensions intensified and the so-

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<sup>47</sup> Gwendolyn Brooks, “Negro Hero: to suggest Dorie Miller,” in *The Essential Gwendolyn Brooks*, ed. Elizabeth Alexander (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 2005), 16-18.

called “Third Battle for Guam” commenced. Reports later found that white marines in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Division tended to antagonize black servicemen on the island, both marines and sailors. They harassed individuals, throwing stones and other things, and African-American servicemen responded in kind. Despite an order issued by the island command’s Provost Marshal prohibiting racial discrimination and charging the individuals to conduct themselves as Americans, or perhaps in accordance with this missive, the situation worsened.<sup>48</sup>

On Christmas Eve 1944, a series of shootings commenced near Agana. In an argument over a native woman, a white sailor shot and killed a black marine. Later, a black marine shot and killed a white marine for harassing him at his post. The situation escalated the following day. A truckload of black sailors, believing that the marines had shot a black sailor, rushed into Agana and confronted white military police. When the sailors learned that no sailors had been harmed, they returned to camp. A truckload of white marines soon followed, entering the black camp and alleging that “one of their number had been hit by a piece of coral thrown from a truck by a Negro.” Later that night, shots fired from the black encampment hit white MPs patrolling adjacent roads. The subsequent search of the black camp revealed a number of illegal weapons, some stolen from the supply depot armory.<sup>49</sup>

The services brought those involved up on charges in the next month. NAACP Executive Secretary Walter White, on a tour of the 93<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division, arrived in Guam to represent some of the black sailors and appear as an expert witness. The board tried the black sailors for unlawful assembling and rioting and apprehended white marines for harassment, suggesting a

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<sup>48</sup> Shaw and Donnelly, *Blacks in the Marine Corps*, 44.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 44-45; Walter White, *A Man Called White: The Autobiography of Walter White* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1948), 280-281.

court martial.<sup>50</sup> White described the trial of the forty-four men at Agana as one of the most revealing experiences of his life. The Navy appointed White, though he had no law degree, as defense counsel to the black defendants. With no assistants or investigators, and no access to confidential Navy records, White investigated the situation, bringing witnesses forward for three weeks to piece the story together. After White left Guam, however, the Board of Inquiry court-martialed the men, sentencing all forty-four to prison terms. The NAACP appealed the conviction and the Navy later reversed the prison terms, but only after taking the case all the way to the President and the Secretary of the Navy.<sup>51</sup>

The Philippines also presented a volatile situation as white American troops attempted to establish segregation and men competed for women. Frequent and close contact with civilians in the Philippines made it unique in the Pacific. Yet the situation also amplified the intricate racial dynamics at play in the Pacific. One black soldier on Luzon wrote home of the misuse and mistreatment of black service units in the Philippines. Men dug ditches in the rain until they fell ill, he bristled. The officers then misused the Articles of War to mistreat and punish black troops as they saw fit. White soldiers from the 6<sup>th</sup> Army often clashed with the black soldiers, and gun and knife fights left many on both sides dead.<sup>52</sup> In October 1945, a group of black soldiers in the Philippines sent a formal letter of complaint to the NAACP. Commanding officers subjected African Americans to brutal treatment on the islands, they charged. At times, officers severely beat men with no repercussions; military police subjected them to random body searches and

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 45.

<sup>51</sup> White, *A Man Called White*, 283-285.

<sup>52</sup> Letter, unnamed soldier to Elaie Austin (then forwarded to NAACP), 30 Sept 1945, folder 7 Camp Investigations Overseas (Pacific), box II:G2; Part II Veterans Affairs File, 1940-1950; MS 34140 Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

spoke disrespectfully to the black troops. “We felt that we were not being treated like soldiers,” wrote the men. “If this thing continues to prevail, the very cause for which we fought, will have defeated its purpose.”<sup>53</sup>

William Knox, a lieutenant in a quartermaster company, described the Philippines as “hell;” one big race riot with constant violence between black and white American troops. “I experienced more racism in the Philippines than anywhere else,” explained Knox. White Americans told Filipinos not to allow black American patrons in certain places or American authorities would shut them down, leading black soldiers to frequent slums in Manila. Knox recounted an incident on the outskirts of Manila where a white enlisted man insulted him in a bar. A black enlisted man leapt to Knox’s defense, telling the white man not to disrespect an officer and striking him. The white soldier left and soon afterwards, shots rang out. When black soldiers nearby heard that a black lieutenant and enlisted man were pinned down in a bar, a brawl ensued, though military police units broke up the fight before any serious damage occurred. Knox encountered the “ugly American” for the first time in the Philippines. The Americans referred to the Filipinos as “Flip,” and treated them disrespectfully and oftentimes brutally. He witnessed a drunk American truck driver hit and kill an old Filipino man. When MPs reached the scene they shrugged off the incident as “just another dead flip.” Yet Knox perceived that “the Filipinos didn’t tolerate the hostility of the whites as much as you might think they did.” Some small factions fought back, and Knox explained that sometimes dead American soldiers

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<sup>53</sup> Letter, Chester S. Perry and twelve other soldiers, “Humiliation on the Philippines [sic]” to “gentlemen” (forwarded to Leslie Perry from Thurgood Marshall), 6 Oct 1945, folder 7 Camp Investigations Overseas (Pacific), box II:G2; Part II Veterans Affairs File, 1940-1950; MS 34140 Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

appeared on the side of the road with their throat slit.<sup>54</sup> Another black soldier corroborated, recalling that the Filipinos had little interest in befriending the soldiers, black or white. Instead the Filipinos questioned the Americans on the state of Filipino independence. The soldier found the Filipinos friendly enough, but set to “squeeze the men for what they were worth,” marking up prices for goods and services.<sup>55</sup>

American occupation troops regularly exploited Filipino women. Charles Evers managed a brothel in Manila, rationalizing, “my cathouses served the well behaved of all races. Black, white, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino. I’ve always been an integrationist.”<sup>56</sup> Writer John Oliver Killens served in the Army and spent time in the Philippines as well. Upon his return to the U.S., Killens wrote a short story on the relationships between American soldiers and Filipino women. Killens described the liaisons between a white American officer in a black transportation outfit and a Filipino laundress. The Americans felt they came as liberators, and could take what they want. When a woman refused a soldier’s advances, he exploded, “we come 10,000 miles, we liberate these goddamn Filipinos, but are they appreciative? Are they grateful? Hell no!” The soldier used his money and influence to seduce a young woman before brutalizing and abandoning her. When the woman’s brother came home from fighting the Japanese, he confronted the Americans and the soldier killed him.<sup>57</sup>

James Ferguson, a marine with the 9<sup>th</sup> Depot Company, spent much of 1944 on New Caledonia. Once, as part of a detail tasked with disposing of some mustard gas bombs, he

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<sup>54</sup> William Knox, interview by Paul Zigo, William Knox Collection (AFC/2001/001/5481) Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

<sup>55</sup> Albert M. Bailey, interview by L.D. Reddick, undated, folder 1/7, Lawrence D. Reddick Project, SCRBC, NYPL.

<sup>56</sup> Evers and Szanton, *Have No Fear*, 51-53.

<sup>57</sup> John Oliver Killens, “Great Liberator,” not dated, folder 51/19 Writings by Killens/Student writing, Columbia, creative writing, “Great Liberator,” typescript, box 51, series 2, subseries 2.3’ John Oliver Killens Papers, MSS#957; Emory University Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Atlanta, GA.

protested that the black soldiers did not have their gas masks on hand. Ferguson requested permission to return to camp for the masks. “Suppose an accident happened,” he argued to the noncommissioned officer. The white marine in charge had a mask, and responded that he could pull the men out of harm’s way himself. Ferguson rebutted, “Hell, if we have our own gas masks, we can get ourselves out, all you got to do is get out of the way.” When the men still refused to work, the sergeant returned with a second lieutenant who recited the Articles of War. “I was sassy, but not mutinous,” said Ferguson. He decided to resume work at that point.<sup>58</sup> The incident stopped there as Ferguson had obtained some notoriety as a boxer in the South Pacific and his commanding officer was a fan. Yet appreciation for Ferguson’s boxing prowess did not extend to all the white marines on New Caledonia. Ferguson recalled the 6<sup>th</sup> Replacement Depot, way up in the hills, was a particularly difficult fight venue. “All you could see was a massive sea of white faces. They would boo, call you names, and throw rocks if they didn’t like the decision.” For the featherweight championship of New Caledonia, Ferguson fought a Japanese-Frenchman from Nouméa, New Caledonia, Louis Yamamoto. White American marines dominated the audience. “They booed me,” said Ferguson. “I hadn’t created any problems. Being black was the only thing I could be wrong. . . . And we were fighting Japan, [though] he was not the enemy.” I could understand the French cheering for him, he continued, but not the Americans. “So they booed me and cheered for Louis Yamamoto. And that’s the way it was.”<sup>59</sup>

A unique environment existed for African-American troops in the Pacific. W.E.B. Du Bois wrote that as a black man, it often seemed that the white world existed to see “that I was

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<sup>58</sup> James Ferguson, interview by Sarah Barksdale, 17 November 2011, Washington, D.C.; James H. Ferguson, *The Story of the Ninth Marine Depot Company* (United States Copyright Office, 1996), 29.

<sup>59</sup> James Ferguson Interview; Ferguson, *Ninth Marine Depot Company*, 26.

kept within bounds. . . . I could not stir, I could not act, I could not live, without taking into careful daily account the reaction of my white environing world.”<sup>60</sup> In the Pacific, as in Europe, white American troops and authorities continued to set boundaries for black American servicemen. With sporadic contact between American troops and Asians/Pacific Islanders, the unpleasantness that routinely occurred in the region stemmed not only from the usual competition for women and sex, but from attempts to reinstate some sort of racial hierarchy. In moments where native populations were involved, white Americans struggled to categorize and control groups that ranked lower on the social ladder on the homefront. Race relations in places like the Philippines demonstrated these uncertainties. White Americans attempted to assert dominance over other racial groups, leading to conflict and oftentimes violence. With the multitude of racial groups, these struggles often led black troops and citizens to feel that white Americans reserved racial hatred exclusively for black Americans. The black press trumpeted the idea to African Americans on the homefront, though the depiction of idyllic Filipino-White American relations missed the mark. One *Chicago Defender* correspondent reported that American behavior in the Philippines had been exemplary. Yet when “a Missippian playing with a group of dark-skinned children on Guam was asked, ‘I wonder if you’d be as nice to kids of that color back home?’ He answered indignantly, ‘These kids are not niggers!’”<sup>61</sup> Hyperbolic though the coverage sounded, it broached the question of where black Americans fit into this racial hierarchy, and exposed the hypocrisy of imposing it abroad.

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<sup>60</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept*, in *Du Bois: Writings* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1986), 653.

<sup>61</sup> “Pacific GIs Save Color Line for ‘Negroes Only’ in Philippines,” *The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967)*; Mar 3, 1945; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975), pg. 2; “Negro Soldiers Treated Worse Than Other Dark-Skinned Peoples, Walter White Finds,” *Atlanta Daily World (1932-2003)*; Mar 9, 1945; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Atlanta Daily World (1931-2003), p. 1.

Generally, with some exceptions, black and white servicemen in the Pacific experienced limited exposure to civilians during the war. On Okinawa, according to marine James Ferguson, authorities forbade American troops to interact with the Okinawans. The people living in the small villages were off-limits.<sup>62</sup> One black sailor approved of this measure, noting that the Okinawans were not worth the interaction. The people were destitute, he remembered. If you ate an apple down to the core and then threw it over the fence, a child would run and grab it.<sup>63</sup> Another soldier on Okinawa recalled that the military prohibited black troops from the Yontan Airfield. Okinawans lived nearby, and black soldiers could get into serious trouble though white soldiers only received minor reprimands. Okinawans were “nasty people,” said the soldier. They fertilized their gardens with human manure.<sup>64</sup> Albert Bailey felt impressed by the Okinawans, rather than disgusted. The death toll on Okinawa was staggering, he lamented. Yet he remembered the craftsmanship of the Okinawans, who built their wooden houses with no nails, each piece of wood perfectly molded so it fit into the next piece, all shaped by hand. The pottery, painting, and glazing were ornate and beautiful, added Bailey, though peculiar to western eyes.<sup>65</sup>

The *Chicago Defender* reported that China welcomed the black troops. As convoys on the Ledo-Burma road arrived in China, masses of people jammed onto the streets of Kunming to welcome both black and white truck drivers. The drivers brought the first American supplies to China via land in three years. Journalists noted that the Chinese had no experience with black

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<sup>62</sup> James Ferguson, interview by Sarah Barksdale, 17 November 2011, Washington, D.C.

<sup>63</sup> Arthur Howard Busby, Sr., interview by Viennease Dennis, Arthur Howard Busby, Sr. Collection (AFC 2001/001/48744), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Collection, Library of Congress.

<sup>64</sup> John David Jackson, interview by Paul LaRue, John David Jackson Collection, (AFC 2001/001/38452), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Collection, Library of Congress.

<sup>65</sup> Albert M. Bailey, interview by L.D. Reddick, undated, folder 1/7, Lawrence D. Reddick Project, SCRBC, NYPL.

people. While the Chinese viewed them with some curiosity, they also treated the troops courteously and welcomed them as guests.<sup>66</sup> Ensign Albert Clifton Stewart recalled that people in Shanghai, especially white Americans, were startled to see a black officer. One evening in Shanghai, a Russian woman asked Stewart to dance. Knowing that this would cause trouble with white Americans, Stewart declined her invitation, saying he did not know how to dance. The woman responded, “I thought all niggers knew how to dance.”<sup>67</sup>

James Ferguson remembered that on New Caledonia, black American troops interacted peacefully with the Kanaks, as the local population was called. Ferguson described the Melanesians as large black men, more like the men in Fiji. When white American troops booed Ferguson in the boxing ring, the native men cheered for him. “I was their hero,” said Ferguson. Kanaks hated the French and were happy to see any form of French defeat. Outside of the boxing venues though, Ferguson described the villages as off-limits to the servicemen. He never actually sighted a Melanesian woman while on New Caledonia.<sup>68</sup> It seemed to him that the Frenchmen on New Caledonia differed from the ones the black troops had heard of in France. Stories of French democracy had reached black troops around the world. Instead, Ferguson thought these Frenchmen regarded the black American troops in the same light as the Melanesian

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<sup>66</sup> Deton J. Brooks, “China Denies Bar on Negro Troops: Rumor Denied as GI’s Arrive on Ledo Road,” in *The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967)*; Feb 17, 1945. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975) p. 1; Frank Bolden, “Tan Drivers Lead Convoy to China over Ledo Road,” in *The Afro-American (1893-1988)*; Feb 10, 1945. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Baltimore Afro-American (1893-1988), p. 1.

<sup>67</sup> Albert Clifton Stewart, interview by Jeanne Christie, Albert Clifton Stewart Collection (AFC/2001/001/68326) Veterans History Project, American Folklife Collection, Library of Congress.

<sup>68</sup> James Ferguson, interview by Sarah Barksdale, 17 November 2011, Washington, D.C.

natives, and treated them as inferiors. “It seemed as though the worst people in France escaped to New Caledonia,” Ferguson mused.<sup>69</sup>

Other rumors existed of dark-skinned Pacific Islanders exhibiting some antagonism toward the black American troops. Historian Lawrence D. Reddick suggested that the people of color in the Pacific also strove for status and prestige among the colonial powers. Colonized peoples frequently experienced racial discrimination, as with the French and Kanaks. Native people of color may have avoided contact with other groups low on the social hierarchy. White Europeans in Europe, on the other hand, did not have to contend for status nor did the same racial hierarchy exist in Europe.<sup>70</sup> In the complicated racial web in the Pacific, every group struggled for status and position. Black Americans resisted punishing conditions and white backlash, as white Americans struggled to maintain a racial hierarchy that made sense in the American cultural paradigm. With the addition of Asians, Pacific Islanders, and other groups, the Pacific became a mixing pot, each group with different understandings of race simultaneously trying to carve out space and status in the region. As Americans fought one another, black troops also tried to assert their American-ness. Though they avoided stringent racial condemnation of the Japanese, they attempted to assert an American identity. W.E.B. DuBois once noted that in the early years of his education he was “blithely European and imperialist in outlook; democratic as democracy was conceived in America.” For DuBois, his education at Harvard broadened his horizons, and his first experience in Europe profoundly modified his outlook on life.<sup>71</sup> Like DuBois before that education, African Americans going

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid. At one point in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, New Caledonia was actually a French penal colony.

<sup>70</sup> Johnnie Ogaro, interview by L.D. Reddick, 14 Feb 1946, folder 1/11, Lawrence D. Reddick Project, SCRBC, NYPL.

<sup>71</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 576, 586.

abroad had a worldview limited to the American experience. The black troops used pointedly American language in their descriptions of the Japanese.

Like the Germans, the Japanese attempted to influence black opinion with propaganda. Scholars have voiced different opinions on African-American perceptions of the Japanese. In 1944, sociologist Gunnar Myrdal suggested that many African Americans would like nothing better than to see the Japanese come through and decimate the South.<sup>72</sup> Evidence suggested otherwise; African Americans made an especial point to demonstrate their loyalty at the advent of the Second World War when they pushed for inclusion in both the mobilization and combat operations. Although they resented fighting for democracy while denied basic civil liberties, most had no illusions about the implications of enemy victory. Some African-American organizations like the Pacific Movement of the Eastern World did view the Japanese as the champions of all people of color. These organizations were unconvinced that an Allied victory would generate any appreciable difference in the African-American situation. Yet groups like the National Urban League or the NAACP persisted in the notion that African-American participation in the war would lead to change.<sup>73</sup> Civil rights advocate A. Philip Randolph openly maligned those African Americans with Japanese sympathies, saying, “any Negro who thinks the Negro people have anything to gain by the victory of Japan in this war is hopelessly dumb, ignorant, and ridiculous . . . the Negroes’ interest in America are tied up with the interests of America. If America goes down, Negroes go down.” The Japanese, argued Randolph, would oppress and exploit African Americans as ruthlessly as they did the Chinese.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Reginald Kearney, *African American views of the Japanese* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), 92.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*, 97.

<sup>74</sup> “Randolph Hits Pro Japanese Negro Groups,” comments by Randolph in Chicago. In *The Chicago Defender (National Edition) (1921-1967)*; Oct 3, 1942; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975) p. 4.

Historian John Dower emphasized that though the propaganda was ineffective, the race war in the Pacific had ramifications for black opinion. In its struggles against Germany and Japan, the U.S. attacked white supremacy, hacking at its own roots in the U.S. As the hypocrisy continued, the symbolic aspect of the Japanese attacks made a lasting impression. The Japanese directly challenged the white establishment, humiliating Europeans and Americans and destroying the myth of white superiority. The attacks also demonstrated the abilities of non-whites to proficiently use modern technology, a subject on which the U.S. had voiced some doubt.<sup>75</sup> Indeed, the propaganda that the Japanese distributed made a limited impression on African Americans. One Japanese radio broadcast suggested that democracy, as white Americans intended, might be an ideal and noble system. American democracy in practice, however, was stained with “the bloody guilt of racial persecution.” In response to the propaganda, the *Chicago Defender* ran an article and retorted that while African Americans might criticize American democracy, they remained staunch Americans, natives to the core. The writers denounced any attempts to link African Americans with the Japanese because of their color as “sentimental bunkum.”<sup>76</sup>

Yet African Americans took different approaches to their treatment of the Japanese. The black press generally avoided condemning the Japanese in overtly racial terms. Writers denounced the use of name-calling, arguing that terms like “yellow bastards,” or any prefix of “yellow” should be avoided. As white papers raged about Japanese atrocities, the black press writers pointed out that Germans and Italians did the same in wartime. The NAACP’s *Crisis* editor, Roy Wilkins, argued that white Americans were interested in making the issue of atrocity

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<sup>75</sup> Dower, *War Without Mercy*, 175.

<sup>76</sup> Editors of Fortune Magazine, “This is the Negro’s War,” *The Chicago Defender (National Edition) (1921-1967)*; Sept 26, 1942; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975), p. A30.

racial.<sup>77</sup> At the same time, the black papers also based their descriptions of the Japanese on military propaganda, encounters, and historic images. The press referred to the Japanese using stereotypes, calling the Japanese cunning, vicious fighters. To an extent, African-American troops in the Pacific accepted these stereotypes, though their beliefs about Japanese soldiers may have been less virulent than those of white Americans. Black servicemen naturally had different feelings than black civilians, and while civilians might be more comfortable excusing certain Japanese actions, servicemen in the Pacific were not likely to feel quite so charitable. Both black and white troops described the Germans and the Japanese as fierce fighters while they pegged the Italians as indolent and lazy. Black servicemen often avoided referring to the Japanese in the overtly racist or color-related language used by white troops. Yet they did subscribe to certain stereotypes, using terms denoting racial differences, often describing them as “tricky” or “little.”

One marine who routinely guarded Japanese prisoners of war noted that one had to watch them constantly. With their slit eyes, warned the marine, they looked as though they were sleeping though in reality they watched their captors like hawks.<sup>78</sup> Another soldier with the 93<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division recalled that many of the prisoners were Japanese officers who seemed disdainful and condescending. On V-J Day, recalled the soldier, the islands in the Pacific erupted in hails of gunfire as the Allied troops celebrated. The noise alarmed the soldier’s prisoners, and he tried to explain the situation. In the stockade, the Japanese prisoners surrounded the soldier when he told them of the unconditional surrender. It seemed to him that they closed in, as if to destroy him. They started “chattering like animals,” said the soldier, and he became frightened and moved out of their reach. Another soldier in the Philippines in 1944

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<sup>77</sup> Kearney, *African American Views of the Japanese*, 119.

<sup>78</sup> McLaurin, *Marines of Montford Point*, 121-122.

described watching white American troops take a picture of another American sitting on a dead Japanese soldier's head and holding a Japanese soldier's hand in each of his own. Some of the black soldiers laughed, remembered the soldier, and asked for replicas.<sup>79</sup> One black enlisted man rebutted the white stereotypes about the Japanese as ignorant or easily duped. They were actually, he thought, very smart and tricky people. Though he refuted the white supremacist attitudes, he simultaneously subscribed to other American manufactured stereotypes.<sup>80</sup>

Like the white Americans, black troops found their own way of "othering" the enemy. Historian Peter Kindsvatter argued that in order to kill the enemy, one generally has to believe that the enemy deserves to die. Soldiers tend to dehumanize the enemy to an extent in order to perform that job. In this context, Americans portrayed the enemy as "godless, evil, barbaric, greedy for conquest, even bestial."<sup>81</sup> With its racial elements, the Pacific War intensified these sentiments. Black troops engaged in this natural dehumanization of the enemy just as white servicemen did. Yet avoidance of the overt racial slurs pointed to a racial awareness among black troops. At the same time, many black troops performed service and guard duties in the Pacific, rather than forward combat operations. Distance from the fiercest of the fighting might also account for a portion of their willingness to validate the enemy's humanity. Indeed, some servicemen, like the black press, actively rejected racial characterizations of the Japanese. Bill Stevens, a staff sergeant in a quartermaster regiment in the 93<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division, complained that whites labeled African-American troops cowards before giving them a chance. The hang-ups that they held about the superiority of white men to men of color did not prepare white

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<sup>79</sup> Albert M. Bailey, interview by L.D. Reddick, undated, folder 1/7, Lawrence D. Reddick Project, SCRBC, NYPL

<sup>80</sup> Robert C. Gibson, interview by L.D. Reddick, 12 Jan 1946, folder 1/9, Lawrence D. Reddick Project, SCRBC, NYPL.

<sup>81</sup> Peter S. Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers: Ground Combat in the World Wars, Korea, & Vietnam* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 192-193.

American troops for the Japanese, continued Stevens. The ““little monkey men,’ you do remember the Japanese were referred to in this and other derogatory terms; they were a colored people,” and the American marines were going to beat them and put them back in their place. It was not the reality, stated Stevens. When the Americans stormed the beaches, they sustained tremendous casualties. The Japanese, the “inferior breed,” were superb fighters. They had all kinds of booby traps and they took the “great white American ego” and used it against the U.S. troops. Stevens recalled that the Japanese demoralized American marines by shaking bushes at night, making sudden noises, “and on occasion slithering into camp and cutting a few throats with a man sleeping beside the victim. The Japanese did everything that kept our men tied in knots.”<sup>82</sup> It seemed at times that Stevens derived some satisfaction from the humiliation of white Americans. At the same time, his use of terms like “our” or “slithering” spoke to his own concept of identity as an American, versus his concept of the enemy “other.”

As Dower argued, propaganda did not attract black troops or diminish servicemen’s loyalty. It did, however, challenge the white establishment in unprecedented ways and shatter the myth of white supremacy. As one black sailor involved in the invasion of Guadalcanal with the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division pointed out, those first men to clash with the Japanese learned the hard way: “It’s one thing to think a race inferior and another for that race to be inferior.”<sup>83</sup> In addition, their encounters with the enemy were far from uniform. One soldier in the 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment felt that captured Japanese were more inclined to be friendly to African-American troops than to white troops.<sup>84</sup> Another opined that the Japanese did not identify with black

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<sup>82</sup> Bill Stevens, interview by Motley, *The Invisible Soldier*, 76-78.

<sup>83</sup> Ray Carter, interview by Motley, *The Invisible Soldier*, 107.

<sup>84</sup> Joseph Garrett, interview by L.D. Reddick, 4 May 1946, folder 1/9, Lawrence D. Reddick Project, SCRBC, NYPL.

soldiers, though they seemed to have no special antagonism against black troops as they did with the white Americans.<sup>85</sup> Marine James Ferguson conceded that after what he saw at Okinawa and other islands in the Pacific, he felt a great deal of anger toward the Japanese for many years. The Japanese were the enemy “and we knew it,” said Ferguson. “They fought dirty [with] suicide troops and the way they treated the prisoners.”<sup>86</sup>

The limited contact with civilians in the Pacific made sex a problematic issue as well. The majority of American servicemen had little contact with women until the occupation of Japan, though there were exceptions as in the Philippines. In the jungle, said one black soldier, the problem of sex was intense. He described the native women as “unattractive; filled with all sorts of diseases.” Besides, they were “off limits” to American service personnel, as were the Dutch women on the islands. The white WACS and Red Cross workers were isolated as well, and General Douglas MacArthur declared contact with these women a hanging offense. There were rumors, however, said the soldier, that both black and white WACS accepted high sums of money for sexual favors.<sup>87</sup> These rumors spread, and WACs resented the implications. African-American WAC Clara Wells spent twenty-six months in the South Pacific and hated the “almost desperate men” on the islands. Wells confirmed that men offered large sums of money for kisses and more, and described the men as “sex crazed,” begging and pleading with the few women present. Wells withstood these pressures, but she inferred that many women did not. Rape attempts were not uncommon.<sup>88</sup> One black soldier noted that in the Pacific, “the men just did

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<sup>85</sup> Johnnie Ogaro, interview by L.D. Reddick, 14 Feb 1946, folder 1/11, Lawrence D. Reddick Project, SCRBC, NYPL.

<sup>86</sup> James Ferguson, interview by Sarah Barksdale, 17 November 2011, Washington, D.C.

<sup>87</sup> Interview with two unnamed soldiers by L.D. Reddick, undated, folder 1/9, D. Reddick Project, SCRBC, NYPL.

<sup>88</sup> Clara Wells, interview by L.D. Reddick, undated, folder 1/14, Lawrence D. Reddick Project, SCRBC, NYPL.

without.” On New Caledonia, explained James Ferguson, the marines had no contact with women. The French set up a house of prostitution, and there was a constant stream of white men to the establishment. “I don’t care what time of day or night there was always a line, and they were all white.” African Americans apparently had no outlet.<sup>89</sup>

Even during the occupation of Japan, policy limited relationships between American servicemen and Japanese women. The sex industry thrived in postwar Japan, but the United States prohibited the immigration of Asian women, or those not predominately of white, African, or Chinese blood.<sup>90</sup> In December 1945, Public Law 271, or the War Brides Act, permitted non-Asian spouses and the children of U.S. military personnel to enter the United States. President Truman added a temporary amendment to the act in 1947. For thirty days that summer, the country allowed women considered racially ineligible for immigration into the U.S. American servicemen scrambled to push through the Supreme Command for the Allied Powers bureaucracy. By the end of the thirty-day window, a total of 823 American servicemen (fifteen of them black) had wed Japanese women. Until the start of the Korean War, American servicemen had no other opportunities to marry Japanese women.<sup>91</sup> Shortly after the window closed, an incident occurred near Tokyo involving an African-American private, Charles Kinchelow, and his Japanese girlfriend Chicko Kayama. Slated to return home to the United States soon but unable to marry, the pair committed suicide together in a roadside Shinto shrine.

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<sup>89</sup> James Ferguson, interview by Sarah Barksdale, 17 November 2011, Washington, D.C.

<sup>90</sup> Michael Cullen Green, *Black Yanks in the Pacific: Race in the Making of American Military Empire after World War II* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010), 69.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, 70.

They had taken poison and were discovered lying side by side on the floor of the shrine by a Japanese school child.<sup>92</sup>

While the black press commented on the unfairness behind the policy which caused this specific incident, it is somewhat unclear how African Americans felt about the romantic or sexual pairing of blacks and Japanese. As one journalist for the Baltimore *Afro-American* put it, just as in Germany there “is fraternization and will be fraternization. . . . If we don’t want our soldiers to fraternize with the Japanese women, we’ll have to change our plans for occupation.”<sup>93</sup> At the same time, with marriage impossible for servicemen with plans to return to the United States, relationships between servicemen and Japanese women acquired a sort of illegitimacy. A white journalist articulated the resulting stereotype in an editorial for the *Pittsburgh Courier* that with few exceptions, Japanese women were either prostitutes or virgins.<sup>94</sup> Servicemen often had relationships with numerous Japanese women with no intention of commitment.<sup>95</sup>

The black press reported a bit about relationships between Japanese women and African American men. Unlike coverage in Europe, however, the black press did not often exhibit outrage about the prohibitions of mixed race marriages in Japan. Instead, articles appeared to celebrate the apparent adulation that African American servicemen enjoyed in Japan, describing the occupation as a “tour in heaven.”<sup>96</sup> Indeed, wrote one journalist, though the Japanese were

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<sup>92</sup> “GI, Jap Girl Die in Suicide Pledge: Couple Take Poison in Roadside Shrine,” in *The Afro-American (1893-1988)*; Mar 15, 1947. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Baltimore Afro-American (1893-1988), p. 5. And “Shades of ‘Madam Butterfly,’” in *The Pittsburgh Courier (1911-1950)*; Mar 22, 1947. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Pittsburgh Courier (1911-2002), p. 6.

<sup>93</sup> Russell Elder, “Why American Soldiers Will Get Along with Japanese Girls,” in *Afro-American (1893-1988)*; Sep 22, 1945; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Baltimore Afro-American (1893-1988), p. 5.

<sup>94</sup> Ted Le Berthon, “White Man’s Views: GIs Forgetting Prejudices, Marrying Japanese Girls,” in the *Pittsburgh Courier (1911-1950)*; Oct 12, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Pittsburgh Courier (1911-2002), p. 6.

<sup>95</sup> Green, *Black Yanks in the Pacific*, 72.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid*, 72.

hated as a race, “their women so unlike their men folk, are sweet and docile.”<sup>97</sup> Some African American servicemen claimed that the Japanese women demonstrated a marked preference for black troops. Private First Class Robert Gibson felt that the Japanese women preferred black soldiers, and related a story in which a Japanese woman rejected a white American soldier in a house of prostitution, favoring a black G.I. instead. Gibson himself had a number of good encounters with Japanese women, and a number of photographs to remember them.<sup>98</sup> A captain in a quartermaster unit in Japan thought the Japanese women attractive and winsome.<sup>99</sup>

In reality, Japanese people could be quite susceptible to white American propaganda about black troops. Japan had a history of valuing lighter skin, associating darker skin with barbarism. In postwar Japanese culture, the stereotype of the African-American occupier as a rapist became a popular image. That the Japanese women still engaged in sexual and other relations with African Americans could partially be a function of contact and the realization that these clichés were untrue. Japanese women often found an association with African American troops profitable everywhere from prostitution to the dance halls. Debates raged over the motives of Japanese women consorting with African American troops. Japanese women were often portrayed as insincere and “sexually over-trained.” The geisha stereotype informed the opinions of many African-American troops as well as black citizens on the homefront.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Irene West, “Japs Will Bear Strange Fruit,” in *The Afro-American (1893-1988)*; Sep 15, 1945. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Baltimore Afro-American (1893-1988), p. 5.

<sup>98</sup> Robert C. Gibson, interview by L.D. Reddick, 12 Jan 1946, folder 1/9, Lawrence D. Reddick Project, SCRBC, NYPL.

<sup>99</sup> Ralph Latimer, interview by L.D. Reddick, 22 Jun 1946, folder 1/10, Lawrence D. Reddick Project, SCRBC, NYPL.

<sup>100</sup> Green, *Black Yanks in the Pacific*, 62-63, 75-77.

African-American servicemen in the Pacific still found that white American troops played upon these stereotypes and attempted to spread misinformation to the local population. Yet white Americans exhibited less hostility toward these couplings than those in Europe. The combination lacked the same political power as the black/white partnerships in Europe.<sup>101</sup> Perhaps for this reason, the black press publicized interracial intimacy in Europe much more than in the Pacific. Yet even in the Pacific these relationships held significance. As in Europe, African-American servicemen more often made the claim that in fighting a war for democracy, they had the right to love whom they chose. At times black and white troops married Japanese women in spite of the regulations, engaging in acts of military and civil disobedience.<sup>102</sup> White Americans also struggled to have relationships with Japanese women, who were off limits to all American troops. These pairings perhaps held more significance because white troops were more likely to openly oppose the policy, and with an underlying sense of confidence that they would succeed in their endeavors. The proliferation of white and Japanese couples into the U.S. led to additional racial change. Historian Susan Zeigler argued that African Americans did not take access to power or recognition of citizenship at this time for granted like white troops did. African American soldiers were more likely to conceptualize the problems of interracial relationships in the Pacific less as individuals, but more as broader social problems and seek collective solutions.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Susan Zeigler, *Entangling Alliances: Foreign War Brides and American Soldiers in the Twentieth Century* (New York: New York University Press), 115. The relationship between black men and white women had more political currency and was more incendiary. As in chapter 2, if relationships at that time resented a power dynamic that privileged males, interracial intimacy between a white man and a black woman still privileged the power of a white man. Similarly in the case of black and Asian partnerships, the relationship fails to upend that traditional racial hierarchy as often both of these groups had less status in the social order.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid*, 179.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid*, 184.

Perhaps one of the most important elements of service in the Pacific, the frequent racial clashes and the struggle for position in the hierarchy, was the proof that people of color and those considered inferior in the United States could stand against the white American paradigm of masculinity. Not only in the American-Japanese conflict, but black American soldiers routinely confronted white troops, and confrontations led to violent and vicious conflicts. In the United States, the white American man was king. W.E.B. Du Bois considered the race concept in his 1940 book *Dusk of Dawn*, mulling over his own education on the concept. “In the elementary school it came only in the matter of geography when the races of the world were pictured: Indians, Negroes and Chinese, by their most uncivilized and bizarre representatives; the whites by some kindly and distinguished-looking philanthropist.” Which was the superior race, he asked. “Manifestly that which had a history, the white race; there was some mention of Asiatic culture, but no course in Chinese or Indian history or culture was offered at Harvard, and quite unanimously in America and Germany, Africa was left without culture and without history.” Americans premised their racial education on the idea that the development of whites was vastly different than that of the “lower races.” Essentially, the racial hierarchy and white supremacy was a manifestation of survival of the fittest. Over time, Du Bois lived to see scientific theories on race debunked. He realized that race was a question of comparative culture, and that “the cultural equipment attributed to any people depended largely on who estimated it.” In his own education, the histories and cultures of the “other” had been suppressed.<sup>104</sup> Du Bois realized through education and observation that he knew little about the histories of these other cultures. The myth of their inferiority had been carefully cultivated in white western cultures, and that his own initial education had conditioned him to believe certain things about the characteristics and

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<sup>104</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 625-627.

capabilities of different people. Although that education and indoctrination may not have manipulated an intellectual like Du Bois, others may have been more susceptible. With less access to resources and education, many African Americans had little idea about the rest of the world and few tools to rebuff the myth of white supremacy, cultivated in the U.S. and enforced through violence and law. They had received a “Jim Crow education” all of their lives. The experience in the Pacific exposed this myth to many.

Not only did people in the Pacific provide a medium for these transformative experiences, but places had the power to adjust understanding of the world. Amzie Moore, one of the later founders of the black freedom struggles in Mississippi, spent three and a half years in the Pacific. There, Moore lectured black troops on their stake in the war to counter the Japanese radio propaganda. Yet even in Calcutta, black troops remained segregated. The contradiction was evident.<sup>105</sup> In his travels, Moore saw Egypt, India, the Red Sea, the Australian coast, parts of the Mediterranean, and spent considerable time in Burma. He sailed the Atlantic, saw the Rock of Gibraltar, and the Suez Canal. Abroad, he learned about ancient civilizations, filling in the holes in his western education. To his astonishment, he found that dark-skinned people built the wonders in India and Egypt, “All the civilization was black—everything was black. And I was so surprised.” For veterans like Moore, the experience in the Pacific opened a new perspective on culture and place. “For a long time,” he explained, “I had the idea that a white man with white skin was superior, because it appeared to me that he had everything. . . . I [had]

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<sup>105</sup> Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 30.

just thought that these [white] people were smarter than we were.”<sup>106</sup> What he saw dispelled this notion. He returned home more than a little angry and “didn’t fail to tell it.”<sup>107</sup>

Captain Walton Jackson wrote letters home about his travels in the Pacific. The furloughs in Australia were a treat for the men, he wrote. They saw the large, far-eastern cities, and mountains so tall that the sun might be shining at the peak while rainclouds collected below. The men could view the whole spectacle in wonder from distant spots. “Yes, war is hell, but life is good,” he proffered. “The lofty mountains, the boundless waters, the endless skies, and the good earth are ever reminders of the minutia.”<sup>108</sup> Another soldier wrote from New Guinea, extolling the beautiful country, mountains, trees, and coral lake. Earlier, wrote the soldier, he spent time in the Philippines, and in spite of the suffering and unofficial battles that raged within the city of Manila, he described it as a “place of extreme beauty.”<sup>109</sup>

From somewhere in Burma, Captain George E. Marshall wrote to Howard University about his travels in North Africa. The Humphrey Bogart film flattered Casablanca, wrote the soldier. It was “truly filthy and teeming with all manner of human debris.” Marshall found Cairo delightful, however, and described it as a beautiful modern city, clean and pleasant. There, wrote Marshall, “we visited the Sphinx and Pyramids. It was a wonderful experience and I was

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<sup>106</sup> Amzie Moore, Interview by Prudence Arndt, 1979, “Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965,” (St. Louis: Washington University Film and Media Archive) < <http://digital.wustl.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=eop:cc=eop:rgn=main:view=text:idno=moo0015.0109.072>>

<sup>107</sup> Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 30.

<sup>108</sup> Letter, Walton Jackson to James Nabrit, Secretary, 2 May 1944, Collection of Letters from Howard University Men and Women in the Armed Forces, 1941-1946, Collection 122-1 to 122-3, box J-Re 122-2, folder Jackson, Walton C.—1944-1945 (holographs); Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>109</sup> Letter, L. Barnwell Washington, Chaplain (captain) to Dean William Stuart Nelson, School of Religion, 4 May 1945, Collection of Letters from Howard University Men and Women in the Armed Forces, 1941-1946, box J-Re 122-2, folder Washington, L. Barnwell; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

thrilled.” Off again, the unit traveled to Tripoli, hot and dusty, and still bearing signs of Rommel’s hasty retreat. From there they moved to Karachi, British India and spent five days with a black ordnance outfit. “Their morale was wonderful and they were happy and proud to see some Negro officers. It seems that the white GIs, in competing for the local female talent, had told the girls that the colored lads had tails. . . . I understand they had quite a row after we left.” They traveled two-thousand miles across India, and “the most beautiful and spectacular sight of the whole trip came at 2 a.m. one morning when we flew over the Taj Mahal and viewed it by moonlight—worth the entire tiresome trip.”<sup>110</sup> Noah Oliver, the precocious seventeen-year old who joined the Navy without his father’s permission after seeing a recruitment poster, planned to see the world. He found the reality different than the recruitment poster featuring sailors lounging with beautiful girls on sandy white beaches. Yet in the end, he saw the world. He “learned how to get along with people, all different nationalities of people.” Oliver felt that when he left the service, it had prepared him to travel or stay anywhere.<sup>111</sup>

Black troops like Moore and Oliver saw new places abroad and experienced the cultures previously concealed from an American consciousness, even if through an American lens. Their interactions with both white Americans and other cultures abroad revealed the contradictions inherent in their task and a complexity about race they may not have noticed before. They realized how unnatural the American order was, got angry and fought against misuse and unfair treatment. “All of it just really surprised me,” said Moore, and “I haven’t had no complex

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<sup>110</sup> Letter, Capt. G.E. Marshall to Mr. James M. Nabrit, Jr. 11 Mar 1945, Collection of Letters from Howard University Men and Women in the Armed Forces, 1941-1946, box Howard University Men and Women in the Armed Forces Correspondence J-Re 122-2, folder Marshall, George E.—1945 (holograph 100); Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>111</sup> Noah Oliver Jr., interview by Michael Willie, Noah Oliver Jr. Collection (AFC/2001/001/32827) Veterans History Project, American Folklife Collection, Library of Congress.

since.”<sup>112</sup> As Lieutenant William Knox said in the Philippines, he witnessed the ugly American for the first time. As they viewed other cultures and peoples, juxtaposed with white American troops, black servicemen learned more about the rest of the world. They learned about others’ perceptions of Americans and the type of imperialism that Americans practiced. What they witnessed was not pretty. They, and other dark skinned groups in the Pacific, floundered to climb an imposed western hierarchy. Involved in a race war in the Pacific, their interactions with the Japanese help debunk these white supremacy myths as well. The Japanese had their own notions of racial supremacy, and had no qualms attempting to assert power over the Americans. During the occupation, though military and civilian authorities attempted to restrict interracial intimacy with the Japanese, both black and white servicemen touted these rules. Their actions and liaisons further deteriorated established conventions of white supremacy. Black servicemen in the Pacific left the theater angry and they directed the bulk of that anger toward white Americans—the fellow veterans and the military and civilian authorities who had made their wartime experience as unpleasant as possible. They carried their anger, knowledge, and determination with them as the war drew to a close and they headed back to the U.S.

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<sup>112</sup> Amzie Moore, Interview by Prudence Arndt, 1979, “Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965,” (St. Louis: Washington University Film and Media Archive) < <http://digital.wustl.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=eop:cc=eop:rgn=main:view=text:idno=moo0015.0109.072>>

## Chapter 4

### “We Return From Fighting:” Demobilization and the Enigma of Black Military Service

7 May 1945

War has been hell with all the trimmings. Tonight I was stopped by civilians for a street dance in Arlon. The Belgians were really celebrating. We Americans had not felt quite all the atrocities that these people had. We danced, drank cognac, played games with the Mesdames and Mademoiselles until early morning. . . . Tears mingled with kisses of joy were their physical reactions to the American GI who had played such a part in liberating them. Here was real happiness for an oppressed people. I could not help but wonder if the folk at home would welcome our return half as much.<sup>1</sup>

Rufus to Vivian

Amidst the celebrations in Europe, an African-American soldier in Belgium composed some thoughts for his sweetheart. Just over three months later, the troops in the Pacific erupted in celebration when they found they would not have to invade mainland Japan. Although equally as homesick as white servicemen, black troops exhibited a mix of apprehension and optimism for their return to the United States. They looked forward to escaping the war, finishing their educations, beginning careers, and returning to family. Yet they feared returning to a hostile racial climate in the U.S. Some preferred to remain in the Armed Forces, leading to greater proportions of African Americans in the postwar military.<sup>2</sup> When the war ended, black troops

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<sup>1</sup>Letter, Rufus to Vivian, 26 Nov 1945, folder# ¼ Reddick Letters from Servicemen During and After World War II, Includes Correspondence with Dwight D. Eisenhower, Lawrence D. Reddick World War II Project, MG 490, SCM 98-19, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (SCRBC), The New York Public Library (NYPL). The soldier attached some of the “highlights” of his stay in the ETO and Pacific to his initial letter, they read like diary entries, and this was his entry of 7 May 1945.

<sup>2</sup> Morris J. MacGregor, *Integration of the Armed Forces, 1940-1965* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History United States Army, 1981), 152-153.

served in the occupation forces. With less combat experience, they had accumulated fewer eligibility points and stayed in service longer. Eventually, black servicemen returned home and rejoined civilian life. The situation was as bad as many had feared. African Americans entered the military during the Second World War with the awareness that their contributions should contribute to greater equality and access to first-class citizenship. Yet what that service should have meant, and what the men experienced as they rejoined society diverged sharply.

Legislators established certain programs to ease veterans' transition back to civilian life; to find employment, housing, and education for more than sixteen million veterans was no small task. Administrators frequently withheld the programs, assistance, and benefits available to white veterans from black veterans. Black veterans also encountered violent backlash in 1946. The injustices perpetrated against black veterans had some impact on the racial environment within the United States. Their experiences both during the war and in the postwar period contributed to President Harry S. Truman's decision to integrate the U.S. military.

In the war's aftermath, the world struggled to pick up the pieces and make sense of the ordeal it had just experienced. This chapter illustrates the environment on the homefront as black troops returned after the war. It examines the actions taken against them as well as actions taken on their behalf by other African Americans and whites. To a degree, the veterans' own voices are removed from this chapter. Rather, in depicting this postwar environment, it explores the importance of their military service as a force for change in other respects, on a national and international scale. It also sets the scene for the next chapter, which explores the ways that black veterans reacted to this homecoming and applied it to the civil rights movement that began to gather force in the decade after the war. In an exploration of the disparity between the meaning of military service and citizenship and their treatment upon returning home, the chapter sets up

that wartime experience as instrumental in initiating seismic social, military, and political shifts. The hypocrisy began galvanizing the black community and (as chapter 5 demonstrates) black veterans in particular. It gave some activists in the black community the tools and rhetoric to push for greater protection under the law and the repeal of segregation in certain institutions.

As the war drew to a close, mounting tensions between the superpowers led to a number of policy conflicts. When Harry S. Truman assumed the presidency in April 1945, his advisers pulled him in different directions on Soviet relations. Some, like Ambassador W. Averell Harriman, warned of Soviet plans to dominate postwar Europe. Secretary of War Henry Stimson and General George C. Marshall opposed inflexible policy toward the USSR. Stimson wanted to maintain the alliance, and Marshall hoped for Soviet assistance against Japan.<sup>3</sup> The question of occupying Germany now loomed as U.S. policymakers debated the country's impending global role and what this entailed for the military.<sup>4</sup> Initially, the U.S. geared its occupation policy toward denazification, democratization, and demilitarization, dismantling Germany's economic ability to wage war. At Potsdam in late summer 1945, the leaders of the U.S., the Soviet Union, and the U.K. agreed on these basic tenets. Before long, however, the Marshall Plan had begun to replace this vision for postwar Germany. Both the U.S. and the Soviets wanted to shape Germany into a country with a new political legitimacy, one that could represent the superpower's own interests.<sup>5</sup> On the military side, the Army was unenthusiastic about the prospect of occupation in Germany. Many believed this should fall under the State Department's purview. Confusion over jurisdiction and policy led to disarray within the military, and in the

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<sup>3</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941-1947* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 204.

<sup>4</sup> John Willoughby, *Remaking the Conquering Heroes: The Social and Geopolitical Impact of the Post-War American Occupation of Germany* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 2.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 8, 73-74.

initial occupation the American military governments operated under different directives, some more lenient than others.<sup>6</sup>

A tumultuous postwar environment for American occupation troops paralleled this disorder. High rates of crime led to disproportionate numbers of criminal charges against African American troops.<sup>7</sup> In 1945, although African Americans constituted about 8.5% of the Army, they represented 17.3% of Army prisoners. For civil offenses like murder, rape, and assault, black troops made up over half of the incarcerated soldiers. Not only did black troops react violently to discrimination and injustice as white Americans tried to impose the colorline abroad, but the commanders held a great deal of power to define offenses and bring charges against offenders.<sup>8</sup> In Weissenburg, Germany, the African-American 351<sup>st</sup> Field Artillery Battalion was part of the occupation force. Military reports abounded with accounts of 351<sup>st</sup> misconduct. Within one month, commanders reported thirty-one incidents ranging from running over sheep with military vehicles, to petty thievery, rape, and assault.<sup>9</sup> The military complained especially of the theft and indicated that black soldiers attracted loose women to the region, thereby spreading venereal disease at an alarming rate. “Needless to say,” reported one official, “the generosity of the negro soldier where frauleins are concerned attracted a large-scale influx of notorious female characters to this city.”<sup>10</sup> The military’s initial expectation, that racially

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 13-15.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 65.

<sup>8</sup> MacGregor, *Integration of the Armed Forces*, 207-209.

<sup>9</sup> Report, Allen D. Raymond to Commanding General, Third U.S. Army, “Report of Investigation Regarding Alleged Conditions in Weissenburg, Germany,” 23 July 1946, box 151; Records of HQ 3<sup>rd</sup> Army 1942-, Adjutant General General Correspondence; Records of U.S. Army Commands Record Group (RG) 338; National Archives at College Park (NACP).

<sup>10</sup> Report, Woodburn C. Williams Office of Military Government, to Director, Office of Military Government for Bavaria, “Situation in Weissenburg Regarding Relations between Female Civilians and Colored Occupational

insensitive German citizens would cause incidents, turned out to be unfounded. Black troops generally had good relationships with German civilians in the 1940s.

Black troops experienced a number of special obstacles during the occupations. U.S. commanders exhibited a disinclination to use African Americans for substantial duties during occupation. Many black regulars, formerly in combat units, found themselves performing menial tasks during occupation.<sup>11</sup> In the postwar period, the percentages of African Americans began to rise in every service but the Marine Corps. The Army rose above its wartime high of 9.68% African American and expected to reach 15% by 1947. With fewer points than white combat troops, the black population remained in the Army longer. In September 1945, the Army designated servicemen with eighty or more points, or over a certain age with a certain number of years in service as eligible for discharge. Enlisted men under age thirty-four with less than forty-five points, or who volunteered, could be sent overseas.<sup>12</sup> The War Department assured the NAACP that they did not discriminate in their redeployment of black troops from Europe to the Pacific. It prioritized men with overseas service considered particularly long or arduous.<sup>13</sup> The War Department certainly did not desire additional African American troops in occupation duty. Yet the department blundered by keeping black servicemen out of combat during the war, and

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Troops,” 5 Jun 1946, box 151; Records of HQ 3<sup>rd</sup> Army 1942-, Adjutant General General Correspondence; Records of U.S. Army Commands RG 338; NACP.

<sup>11</sup> MacGregor, *Integration of the Armed Forces*, 211.

<sup>12</sup> Press Release, War Department Bureau of Public Relations, 5 Sept 1945, “Enlisted Men with 45 or More Points as of May 12 Will Not Be Sent Overseas,” folder 15, box II:G9; Part II Veterans Affairs File, 1940-1950; MS 34140 Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>13</sup> Letter, Major General Edward F. Witsell, Acting The Adjutant General, to Jesse O. Dedmon, Jr. Secretary Veterans Affairs, 14 Sept 1945, folder 15, box II:G9; Part II Veterans Affairs File, 1940-1950; MS 34140 Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

later found itself with a surplus of black troops, uncertain of where or how to place them and maintain segregation.

In addition to longer terms of service, many African Americans reenlisted, either unable to find work at home or anticipating more stability and opportunity with a military career and fearful of the racial environment and violence in the United States.<sup>14</sup> Others, however, voiced their displeasure on the slow rates of discharge. James Cannon II of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Depot Company wrote to the NAACP from Banika in the Russell Islands. Cannon complained that his commanding officer promised the unit (four hundred fifty African Americans, three hundred whites, and a number of white officers), priority on the first transport. Two months had passed, he continued, and most of the whites were gone. The commanders told the black troops that they needed to unload four ammunition ships before they could leave. Cannon described low morale in his unit; the men seemed desperate and military discipline was lacking. Some believed the military held back men available for discharge just to perform manual labor.<sup>15</sup> Another soldier stationed in Japan also alleged that the Army retained black soldiers eligible for return to the U.S. in service. He charged that white company officers abused their authority, threatening black soldiers with delaying their return to the U.S. The soldier felt that nobody was protecting black soldiers' rights abroad.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to dealing with the larger percentage of African-American troops, the occupation authorities faced the continuing problem of black and white American relations. One

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<sup>14</sup> MacGregor, *Integration of the Armed Forces*, 152-153.

<sup>15</sup> Letters, James Cannon II to Walter White, 29 Oct 1945 and 1 Nov 1945, folder 5 Camp Investigations N-P, box II:G2; Part II Veterans Affairs File, 1940-1950; MS 34140 Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>16</sup> Letter, Merrit L. Gordon to Walter White, 2 Dec 1945, folder 2 General Correspondence Jan-March 1946, box II:G10; Part II Veterans Affairs File, 1940-1950; MS 34140 Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

black soldier in Otaru, Japan, protested that white servicemen instructed proprietors of restaurants and other public facilities to refuse service to black servicemen. Three men in his unit had done some work at an Ordnance Depot in Sapporo, twenty-three miles away from their camp. The men broke for lunch at noon, unfinished with their work. With no nearby black organization, they asked to eat with white enlisted men. The white cooks consented to feed the black soldiers only after receiving a direct order from a commanding officer.<sup>17</sup>

With rising percentages of black servicemen the military needed to reassess its utilization of black manpower. Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy and Henry Stimson's replacement as Secretary of War, Robert Patterson, initiated a review of the current situation. In October 1945, the War Department formed a board, headed by Lieutenant General Alvan C. Gillem, Jr. of Tennessee. The group worked quickly, and submitted recommendations within two months. Recognizing that the Army had failed to make effective use of the 909,000 African-American troops at its disposal, the Gillem Board suggested a "progressive policy for greater utilization of Negro manpower." While it did not question the underlying principle of segregation, the board suggested that the Army might continue grouping black units within larger white units, forming "composite organizations," as with the 5<sup>th</sup> platoon project in Europe or the Navy experiments. Through these composite units, personnel could form professional relationships, which would be advantageous to the Army in wartime expansions. The board members noted, however, that the experiments should be limited to avoid disrupting civilian racial relationships.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Draft of the Gillem Board Report, ca. 1946. Security Classified Records, Record Group 220: Records of the President's Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services. Harry S. Truman Library & Museum, Desegregation of the Armed Forces [http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study\\_collections/desegregation/large/documents/pdf/13-1.pdf#zoom=100](http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/desegregation/large/documents/pdf/13-1.pdf#zoom=100), 20-22, 28-29, 38, 39; MacGregor, *Integration of the Armed Forces*, 153-155.

All of the Army's three major components, the Services of Supply, Air Forces, and Ground Forces strenuously objected to composite organizations, and the Service and Ground Forces attempted to reestablish the colorline in the officer's mess and recreational facilities.<sup>19</sup> The Army also continued to station black troops in southern regions with strong anti-black sentiment—places like Fort Jackson, South Carolina, or Fort Benning, Georgia—against the board's recommendations. At Benning, according to one reporter, Major General J.W. O'Daniel yielded to local segregation customs. The black press had quickly seized on the discrepancies between policy and practice in the postwar period and protested the continued misuse of black troops. Reporters contended that O'Daniel and others like him had seized upon the ambiguities of the report and deliberately confused the issues.<sup>20</sup>

For those African Americans still in the military, little changed in the postwar period. Before marine David Dinkins finished boot camp at Montford Point, the war ended. He remembered that the drill instructor entered the room and commanded, “get down on your knees and thank god the war is over.’ Then he said, ‘get up, nothing’s changed.’ And nothing had changed,” remembered Dinkins.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, some members of the 51<sup>st</sup> Defense Battalion complained that after spending twenty-one months overseas, they returned to North Carolina

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<sup>19</sup> Draft of the Gillem Board Report, ca. 1946. Security Classified Records, Record Group 220: Records of the President's Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services. Harry S. Truman Library & Museum, Desegregation of the Armed Forces [http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study\\_collections/desegregation/large/documents/pdf/13-1.pdf#zoom=100](http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/desegregation/large/documents/pdf/13-1.pdf#zoom=100), 38.

<sup>20</sup> “Army's Top Brass Still Chooses to Ignore Gillem Report: Bulk of Colored Troops Stay Stationed in South,” in the *Afro-American (1893-1988)*; Nov 15, 1947. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Baltimore Afro-American (1893-1988), p. 8; “Army's New Order Sends All Tan Yanks to Southern Camp: Action Clear Violation of Gillem Board Report,” in the *Afro-American (1893-1988)*; Jan 25, 1947. ProQuest Historical newspapers: The Baltimore Afro-American (1893-1988), p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> “David Dinkins, National Visionary,” interview not attributed/dated, National Visionary Leadership Project, 2002-2008, accessed March 21, 2014, <http://www.visionaryproject.com/dinkinsdavid/>.

only to clean up after white marines at Lejeune.<sup>22</sup> Navy fireman Joseph Saunders still had time left in service when the war ended. The Navy sent him from the Marianas to Norfolk, Virginia to wait for another ship. Saunders described persistent racial tensions at Norfolk and a number of clashes. The mess hall was particularly volatile. Servicemen all ate in one large dining room, proceeding through one chow line before moving to designated black and white areas. On Thanksgiving 1946, Saunders filled his tray and looked for a place to sit. With the black section full, Saunders and a small group of black sailors sat on the white side. Shortly thereafter, a white marine approached the table and ordered the black sailors out. A fight broke out when they refused to move.<sup>23</sup>

Small fights occurred regularly, and oftentimes elevated further. In December 1946 at Lowry Field, Colorado, a white female member of the NAACP visited her son in the Air Corps. She reported a great deal of antagonism between black and white troops. Red Cross workers told her that African American troops, resenting poor treatment, sometimes attacked lone white soldiers on base. After an investigation, the War Department determined that a series of small fights at the Service Club led to near riot conditions. While MPs struggled to quell the fights, several hundred black soldiers congregated and began throwing stones at the MP patrol. The MPs reacted using tear gas to disperse the crowd “in order to prevent what might easily have become a riot.” The black airmen disbursed briefly, but soon reassembled and continued throwing stones. Fire trucks arrived on the scene, turned spotlights on the black troops and

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<sup>22</sup> Letter, H & S Battery, 51<sup>st</sup> Def. Bn. to NAACP, 6 Feb 1946, folder Soldeir Complaints, Anonymous, 1943-1948, box II:G15; Part II Veterans Affairs File, 1940-1950; MS 34140 Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>23</sup> Joseph P. Saunders, interview by Walter Valentine, Joseph P. Saunders Collection (AFC/2001/001/12345), Veterans Oral History Project, American Folklife Collection, Library of Congress.

sprayed them with “foamite.” The crowd finally retreated.<sup>24</sup> In the postwar years, racial tension in the military remained high throughout the country.

Likewise, those African Americans rejoining civilian society faced indifference, discrimination, hostility, and at times brutality. From the moment they arrived back in the U.S., they found a very different reception than returning white troops. In late April 1945 the U.S. Army liberated Stalag VII-A, and POW Isham Benton made his way back to the United States. The recently liberated Americans rode across Europe in trucks, and one day as Benton climbed aboard, a man in the crowd hissed, “Nigger.” Benton snapped that unless the man wanted trouble, he had better back off. He continued his journey, arriving at Camp Shanks, New York toward the end of May. Benton felt that black troops were not treated like returning heroes. They arrived to a different reception than white troops. On “that particular trip I was hurt by it, because there was nobody there to welcome us and embrace us. It was another one of those heartbreaking things that you experienced in those days. . . . but it was great to be home.”<sup>25</sup> Many black servicemen complained of the chilly reception upon their return. One 92<sup>nd</sup> Division soldier arrived at Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, where there were “no colored folks to meet us,” he lamented. “Only white Red Cross workers with bottles of milk, doughnuts, and shaving kits.”<sup>26</sup> But another soldier from the 92<sup>nd</sup>, John Johnson, remembered a warmer reception at nearby Fort

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<sup>24</sup> Letter, Mary H. Thornton, Executive Secretary, Bridgeport, CT to Madison S. Jones, Jr., Administrative Assistant, 1 Dec 1946; Letter Brigadier General B.M. Bryan to Jessee O. Dedmon, Jr., (rec) 20 Jan 1947, folder 3 Camp Investigation L, box II:G2; Part II Veterans Affairs File, 1940-1950; MS 34140 Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>25</sup> Isham George Benton, interview by Douglas Clanin, Isham George Benton Collection (AFC/2001/001/9170), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>26</sup> Luther E. Hall, Jr., interview by Ellen Holton, Luther Hall Collection (AFC/2001/001/29086), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Dix, where men from the 92<sup>nd</sup> had the run of the camp. Johnson recalled that some from the 92<sup>nd</sup> marched down Fifth Avenue in a parade.<sup>27</sup>

The return to segregation also galled many returning servicemen. One soldier from the 784<sup>th</sup> Tank Battalion remembered that transportation segregation took effect the moment they arrived home. A man in his unit kicked a bus driver for ordering him to the back, and landed in jail. “So we just said what’s best for us to do is play it a little cool if we want to make it back home,” he recalled.<sup>28</sup> The situation on the homefront had not changed; Jim Crow still reigned supreme. Black veterans visibly symbolized black potential and racial change, and the hostility only escalated. Their very presence led to physical and political backlash from some in the white community.

White military and civilian authorities largely ignored the African-American contribution to the war, overlooking acts of valor. No African-American servicemen were awarded the Medal of Honor in the Second World War until four decades later. As government agencies set up rehabilitation and re-assimilation programs for veterans in the postwar period, they overlooked the particular concerns of black troops, making few of these resources available to black veterans. While measures like the G.I. Bill purported to serve all veterans regardless of color, the Veterans Administration often left local offices to manage rehabilitation efforts. A lack of federal oversight and the limited availability of jobs, loans, and medical care (made even smaller by segregation) meant that black veterans felt the return to civilian life more acutely than whites. To avoid giving them the same remunerations as white veterans, civilian and military authorities had rendered their service invisible. The establishment officially sanctioned this invisibility

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<sup>27</sup> John Thomas Johnson, interview by Erica Sugar, John Thomas Johnson Collection (AFC/2001/001/10701), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>28</sup> Louis S. Conn, interview by William Bruckner, Louis Conn Collection (AFC/2001/001/43716), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Collection, Library of Congress.

when policymakers refused to recognize that local discrimination handicapped black veterans, simultaneously insisting on colorblind policies and recordkeeping. It did not surprise the black community, as this treatment was consistent with black treatment in the armed services during the war. Yet it served to accentuate the hypocrisy of fighting for democracy while simultaneously occupying a second-class citizenship. Each of these injustices provided black activists with additional fuel to combat segregation, particularly in the military.

Like many servicemen, African-American veterans dealt with post-traumatic stress and injuries in the wake of the war. The postwar period ushered in tremendous medical challenges for veterans of both races. By the Second World War, the American public had just begun to understand mental illness and psychological trauma as a result of violence. The American military struggled to keep abreast of mental health diagnoses and treatments, though it lacked a sufficient number of qualified mental health professionals. In 1946, the American Psychiatric Association had just over 3,500 members nationwide, only 900 of whom treated military patients. Servicemen in the Second World War had experienced longer periods of sustained fighting than in any previous war except the American Civil War. Some units had been deployed overseas and in combat zones for years.<sup>29</sup> Community centers often employed counselors (for jobs, education counseling etc), but refused to use African Americans or other minorities as counselors. White counselors, often unfamiliar with minority problems or communities, were handicapped as to how much help they could provide for African American veterans.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Michael D. Gambone, *The Greatest Generation Comes Home: The Veteran in American Society* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2005), 39-41.

<sup>30</sup> American Council on Race Relations, "Survey of Community Veteran Information Centers," in *The Southern Regional Council Papers, 1944-1968, Series VII: Veteran's Service Project, 1944-1951, Reel 189, VII: 29. The Southern Regional Council Papers, 1944-1968, microfilm.*

Hoyt William Fuller served in the 92<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division and described his Army career as “swift and terrible and otherwise undistinguished.” Pulled out of an Army Specialized Training Program and dropped into the 370<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment as it moved to the Italian front, Fuller branded Italy as “the ghastliest experience of my life. . . . I saw close friends die like flies sprayed by DDT, and I reached the point where I wanted to die as well. I stopped being afraid, stopped feeling anything at all. I tramped all over the mountains and valleys of Italy like a man in a trance. When the war ended in Europe that cloudy day in May . . . I felt neither joy nor relief. My very soul had been numbed.”<sup>31</sup> When the war ended, Fuller studied languages and literature at the University of Florence. “It was a lovely experience,” he admitted. And in Florence, the city of art, music, and history, “I regained something of a sense of life.” Feeling returned, he wrote, and with that feeling came the rush of “fear and anguish and horror that I had shut out of my being during the war. I had a nervous collapse.” In November 1945 Fuller returned home to his family with a severe nervous condition. They never knew, he remembered.<sup>32</sup>

Black servicemen not only experienced trauma from the shock of war and violence, but from the discrimination, racism, and hatred that their compatriots projected. Historian John Hope Franklin’s brother, Buck Franklin, Jr. served in the U.S. Army. Buck recalled to his brother how a white sergeant made his life hell, ensuring that Buck did nothing but peel potatoes. “Clearly,” wrote Franklin, “my brother’s education and attainments, already nullified by a segregated army that would never meaningfully promote him, were also enough to draw vicious cruelty from this

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<sup>31</sup> Hoyt William Fuller, “The Biography of Hoyt William Fuller,” p. 2, folder 2, box 6, Hoyt William Fuller Collection, 1940-1981, Robert W. Woodruff Library of the Atlanta University Center, Inc. Fuller was an important figure in the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

racist officer.”<sup>33</sup> When Buck left the Army in March 1944 on disability, he suffered from lung cancer though the disease was still relatively unknown, and spent the next three years in and out of veterans’ hospitals.<sup>34</sup> Shortly before Franklin’s death, he either fell or jumped from the second-story window of a hotel, experiencing multiple fractures. After he regained consciousness, he refused to recount what had happened. Franklin passed away soon after, having battled with bouts of depression since his discharge.<sup>35</sup>

While Buck Franklin obtained employment and medical treatment in the postwar period, many veterans were less fortunate. With segregation in place, veteran’s hospitals generally had African-American doctors and nurses attending black veterans.<sup>36</sup> While this meshed with the standard practice of separate but equal, it led some to question whether the Veteran’s Administration (VA) was actually helping to rehabilitate black veterans. Many hospitals refused to admit black patients. The U.S. Public Health Service estimated that out of about a million and half hospital beds in the country, only about 15,000 were available to the black population in the mid-1940s—about 1%. In the South, the situation was compounded because oftentimes medical personnel were unavailable to treat minority patients. The black community lacked adequate numbers of African-American physicians, and the majority of black physicians worked in the North.<sup>37</sup> In 1945, a report by the NAACP found that seventeen VA hospitals in ten states did not

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<sup>33</sup> John Hope Franklin, *Mirror to America: The Autobiography of John Hope Franklin* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 128.

<sup>34</sup> John Hope Franklin and John Whittington Franklin, ed. *My Life and an Era: The Autobiography of Buck Colbert Franklin* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1997).

<sup>35</sup> Franklin, *Mirror to America*, 129.

<sup>36</sup> “Full Segregation for Negro Doctors in Veterans’ Setup,” in *The Pittsburgh Courier (1911-1950)*; Mar 23, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Pittsburgh Courier (1911-2002), p. 1.

<sup>37</sup> The President’s Committee on Civil Rights, *To Secure These Rights: The Report of the President’s Committee on Civil Rights* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1947), 72-73.

accept black veterans except in emergencies.<sup>38</sup> African-American veterans constantly found fault with the Veterans' Administration services. Sailor Calvin Miller had been wounded in the invasion of Guam. Another sailor dropped a shell on Miller's foot. Back on the ship, they told Miller it was a contusion, but in a naval hospital six months later Miller found out his foot was broken in several places. Miller experienced trouble later on with his foot but received no help from the VA. He objected that the doctor that diagnosed him was a white southerner. When the doctor wrote "contusion" on the record, it prevented aid later. In addition, said Miller, the medical records were short and incomplete—the man was probably dead now, said Miller, "probably in hell."<sup>39</sup>

In the organizations and provisions established to rehabilitate veterans, policymakers had failed (at times deliberately) to include African-American veterans. Congress first passed the Servicemen's Readjustment Act (G.I. Bill) in 1944, to aid veteran's transition into civilian society. Historians have disagreed on the G.I. Bill's effect on African-American veterans. Some have argued that the bill widened the racial gap in postwar America, while others have interpreted a more positive outcome. In truth, the bill had far reaching and often unintended consequences. It was far too complicated for absolutes. As journalist Edward Humes wrote, the G.I. Bill's benefits "were dispensed and used inside a society expressly designed to cheat, belittle, and oppress black Americans. The rose itself might have been hearty and bountiful, but its roots were planted in poisoned soil."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 120-121.

<sup>39</sup> Calvin C. Miller, interview by Gwendolyn Coley, Calvin Coolidge Miller (AVC/2001/001/74496) Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

<sup>40</sup> Edward Humes, "How the GI Bill Shunted Blacks into Vocational Training," *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, No. 53 (2006), 94. Humes references the historiographical debate about the G.I. Bill in his article. As he notes, Katznelson argues that the contradiction between professedly color-blind benefits and profoundly biased

The law's architects designed it to alleviate any potential postwar recession, and educational benefits facilitated readjustment for both veterans and society. Policymakers realized that as veterans returned in large numbers, they were unlikely to find employment all at once. Time taken off to complete education would ease the pressure on the U.S. job market.<sup>41</sup> The Committee on World War Legislation in the House of Representatives, chaired by Mississippi Democrat John E. Rankin, crafted much of the bill. In 1944, following the Port Chicago mutiny, the United States Navy had requested that the victims' family receive reparations of \$5,000. When Rankin learned that black sailors constituted the majority of the deceased, he insisted that Congress reduce the amount of money.<sup>42</sup> He also objected when the War Department passed a measure prohibiting segregation in national cemeteries, and worked to ensure that the South did not have to use federal land for cemeteries. The "white boys" of the South were buried in local, segregated graveyards.<sup>43</sup> An unabashed racist, anti-Semite, anti-Catholic and opponent of unions, Rankin engineered the G.I. Bill so as to maintain segregation in the South and prevent federal intervention in "state's rights."

Rankin and his allies worked frantically in the House and Senate to defeat alternative versions of the bill. The American Legion, a segregated organization, also had no problem playing politics to gain the support of southern politicians in Congress. Rankin also stipulated that locally appointed Veterans Administration officials should control the dispensation of

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allotments of resources warranted closer study. Katznelson detailed the ways that African Americans were excluded from various G.I. Bill programs, from access to higher education to job assistance.

<sup>41</sup> Glenn C. Altschuler and Stuart M. Blumin, *The G.I. Bill: A New Deal for Veterans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 66.

<sup>42</sup> Robert L. Allen, *The Port Chicago Mutiny: The Story of the Largest Mass Mutiny Trial in U.S. Naval History* (Berkeley, CA: Heyday Books, 2006), 68.

<sup>43</sup> "The Shape of Things," *The Nation*, 165, no. 13 (1947), 297.

benefits to veterans, a demand to which the VA readily ceded. He guaranteed that the VA had sole control over the G.I. Bill's budget.<sup>44</sup> In the spring of 1944, the bill cleared both houses of Congress, but Rankin still objected to certain provisions on unemployment compensation that allowed veterans to collect unemployment benefits for a year. He was convinced that the fifty thousand black veterans in Mississippi would purposely remain unemployed all year just to collect the benefits. While the American Legion attempted to push the bill through anyway, arguing that Rankin was simply stalling because of his dislike for African Americans, he insisted that they limit unemployment compensation to twenty-six weeks, and put job placement services within the Veteran's Administration rather than at the United States Employment Services (USES).<sup>45</sup>

President Roosevelt signed the amended version of the bill on June 22, 1944 and the glitches began surfacing immediately. The VA and USES battled over jurisdiction. Veterans were often unsure where to go for job and counseling assistance, and the USES had insufficient staff to provide the necessary help. For white returning veterans, many of the job placement problems faded into the background as the economy reabsorbed many of the veterans. Within six months of discharge almost seventy percent of veterans without disabilities found employment, alleviating congressional fears of another bonus march.<sup>46</sup> Over the next year, committees in the House and Senate continued to hold hearings as the implementation of the G.I. Bill evolved. Eventually, the initial failures of the bill turned into successes for white veterans. African Americans soon found Rankin's provisions for maintaining the southern racial order

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<sup>44</sup> Humes, "How the G.I. Bill Shunted Blacks into Vocational Training," 95-96; Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White*, 122-123.

<sup>45</sup> Altschuler and Blumin, *The G.I. Bill: A New Deal for Veterans*, 69-70.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 73-79.

alarming effective. The VA stayed true to its word and took care not to disrupt Southern society. With exclusive control over the G.I. Bill's budget, the VA accounted for about fifteen percent of federal expenditures by 1947. In addition, the Veteran's Administration provided no administrative control or review over local counselors and their treatment of black veterans.<sup>47</sup> As a result, black veterans encountered discrimination in a variety of capacities in their dealings with the VA.

Harry Wright of Jackson, Mississippi spent three and a half years in the Marine Corps, twenty-three months overseas with the 51<sup>st</sup> Defense Battalion. After the war, he conducted research for the Southern Regional Council, investigating veterans' opportunities throughout the region. In one small Mississippi town, Wright searched for a service officer to speak with black veterans on their rights and opportunities. "I wanted the fellows to get information only from official sources," he explained. He found an office barely large enough to sit down. "The room was too small," he reproached, "even for segregation." The white service officer attended him immediately, asking what he wanted in order to get him out of the room. Wright offered to come back later, with the impression that this man had little interest in speaking to a hopeful group of black veterans. He drove over fifty miles to Jackson to find a VA employee for the work. There, he found someone willing to speak with a group of more than a hundred black veterans about benefits. On the whole though, Wright reported poor leadership, organization, and a lack of officials willing to distribute information to black veterans in Mississippi. Areas that lacked black professionals meant lower educational levels and poor facilities. Few people in these cities knew anything about veterans' training programs or educational benefits.<sup>48</sup> The mass migrations

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<sup>47</sup> Hume, "How the G.I. Bill Shunted Blacks into Vocational Training," 96.

<sup>48</sup> Letter, Harry Wright to Dr. George S. Mitchell, 16 Feb 1946, in Southern Regional Council Papers, 1944-1968, Series VII: Veteran's Service Project, 1944-1951, Reel 188, VII: 31. The Southern Regional Council Papers,

throughout the war and into the postwar period not only led to social disorganization in northern cities, but had the potential to produce an imbalance and a lack of black elite in many communities in the South. While Wright met with some success in that instance, he noted that was not the pattern in the South. The Veterans Administration itself was not overly friendly to African Americans. As black veterans filtered back into the United States and faced the overwhelming task of readjustment, they consistently found official resources out of reach.

The problem of employment became particularly acute in the postwar period. As one headline in *Ebony* magazine advertised: “Wanted: Jobs for a Million Vets.” Both federal and state programs designed to ease this process all but ignored black veterans. On the homefront, female and African-American defense workers began losing jobs as white servicemen returned. In the federal government, the number of African Americans had leapt from 40,000 prior to the war, to 300,000 in 1944. The skill levels for defense work rose, and many black workers advanced from custodial to clerical or professional categories. Private war industries downsized, and many employers resumed postwar discriminatory practices. President Roosevelt’s Fair Employment Practices Committee reported that the “wartime gains of Negro, Mexican American, and Jewish workers are being lost through an unchecked revival of discriminatory practices.” Unemployment increased among white Americans by about one and a half times, but black unemployment more than tripled.<sup>49</sup> In the late 40s and early 1950s liberals pushed for Fair

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1944-1968, microfilm; Report, n.d. work beginning 7 January, 1946. Excerpts of weekly reports of veterans traveling for veterans services program, Southern Regional Council. Information on Harry Wright, p. 13. In Southern Regional Council Papers, Series VII: Veteran’s Service Project, 1944-1951, Reel 188, VII: 32. The Southern Regional Council Papers, 1944-1968, microfilm.

<sup>49</sup> President’s Committee on Civil Rights, *To Secure These Rights*, 59-63.

Employment Practices legislation in Congress. While they won some victories at the state level, the coalition for fair employment practices was largely thwarted in its efforts.<sup>50</sup>

Without central oversight, employment discrimination flourished as veterans arrived back in the United States. Even in liberal unions, minorities encountered discrimination.<sup>51</sup> Some industries argued that employment in the postwar period was an issue of seniority. The Auto Workers Union (UAW), founded as part of the Congress of Industrial Organization, (CIO), favored the retention of all senior employees regardless of race or color. Union president R.J. Thomas argued that the question of safeguarding the jobs of qualified black employees had become obsolete, asserting that the organizations had to stop thinking of employees in racial or religious terms. Widely regarded as a leading organization on the civil rights front, the UAW-CIO possessed a Fair Practices Committee with the power to investigate discrimination, and an advisory conference on discrimination that met twice a year to review and evaluate the committee's work. Yet even the UAW refused some form of "proportional seniority," arguing that seniority was the keystone of union security, and that "proportional seniority" constituted a form of reverse discrimination.<sup>52</sup> These policies created serious problems for African

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<sup>50</sup> Anthony S. Chen, *The Fifth Freedom: Jobs, Politics, and Civil Rights in the United States, 1941-1972* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 1-7, 16, 20, 28. Chen detailed efforts toward FEP legislation in the 1940s with the FEPC, and postwar efforts in non-Southern states. He showed that federal jurisdiction over job discrimination became decentralized and lacked authority. Overall, in spite of efforts like Ives-Quinn, these efforts at Fair Employment Practices failed. Though unsuccessful, affirmative action emerged as the "unexpected by-product" of the failed struggle for the FEP regulatory framework that began with Randolph's 1941 MOWM. Affirmative action did not emerge as more than a vague idea until the late 1960s. 1-7, 172, 230.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 14.

<sup>52</sup> Internal UAW-CIO Fair Practices Committee, "R.J. Thomas Speaks on Seniority in UAW," Pamphlet, *Headlines and Pictures* (Detroit, MI: UAW-CIO Education Department, July 1945), 18, folder 40 Race Relations: Pamphlets, Correspondence, Reports, 1945-1946, box 2; UAW Fair Practices Department; Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI. In 1946 Walter P. Reuther succeeded Thomas as president of the UAW. Under Reuther's leadership the UAW made a stronger push to eradicate discrimination working with the coalition for Fair Employment Practices. He was an ardent supporter of civil rights and a powerful force throughout the movement. Still, Anthony Chen notes in *The Fifth Freedom* that even the most liberal unions encountered mixed if not rebellious responses from white members. In addition, Chen notes that African Americans

Americans, oftentimes only allowed into defense work for the first time in 1941 with the Fair Employment Practices Act, and even then in limited numbers. Most industries did not bother to justify their policies, but simply refused to hire African Americans.

African-American servicemen returning to civilian life felt the problem immediately. When sailor Louis Perkins reached home in Corpus Christi, he found nobody would give him a job so he went back to school.<sup>53</sup> Charles Berry left Chattanooga at seventeen for the Army because the only employment for African Americans was menial labor. When he returned from Japan in 1949, he found the situation much the same. He reenlisted, hopped on a train, and left Tennessee behind.<sup>54</sup> The worst part, said a soldier who served in the Pacific, was coming back from overseas and not being able to get a job. This man reenlisted as well and joined the paratroopers.<sup>55</sup> Huge numbers of veterans faced unemployment. Local offices serving veterans lacked African American personnel, and often times white personnel with the United States Employment Service were hostile to black veterans looking for re-employment aid or counseling.<sup>56</sup>

Plenty of jobs were available but too often with low wages and unattractive work. Many black veterans had acquired new skills and experience in the military, and balked at the idea of

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often exhibited suspicion about various unions' commitment to equal employment practices. Many viewed these union commitments as public relations rather than actual bids for equality. Chen, *The Fifth Freedom*, 14.

<sup>53</sup> Louis Raymond Perkins, interview by Richard Miller, Louis Raymond Perkins Collection (AFC/2001/001/21540) Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>54</sup> Charles Earnest Berry, interview by Michael Willie, Charles Earnest Berry Collection (AFC/2001/001/5950) Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>55</sup> James Rutledge, interview by Judith Kent, James Rutledge Collection (AFC/2001/001/30996) Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>56</sup> George Mitchell, report on work of Veterans Service Division, Southern Regional Counsel, 12 Feb 1946, in Southern Regional Council Papers, Series VII: Veteran's Service Project, 1944-1951, Reel 189, VII: 31. The Southern Regional Council Papers, 1944-1968, microfilm.

returning to the same menial positions as before the war. The G.I. Bill benefits entitled returning veterans to a twenty dollar a week readjustment allowance for fifty-two weeks. In some southern states, USES counselors refused to recognize black veterans' increased skill levels and steered them towards jobs like ditch digger or porter. Employers complained about the difficulty of getting African American veterans to take these jobs rather than the readjustment pay. In addition to general prejudice in hiring and employment services, local employment offices were inefficient and prejudiced. To maintain segregation, the USES often designated a separate building or section of a building for African Americans, but it staffed these separate sections with white receptionists, clerks, and interviewers. Only in some cities, most especially in North Carolina, Georgia, and Virginia, did the USES staff the black office with black employees. While the local USES officials claimed they were careful to make no racial distinctions in race on referrals and notices of skilled vacancies, African-American job-seekers told a different story.<sup>57</sup>

In addition, the black employment facilities often lacked decent conditions. Local offices placed the black segments in inadequate, dirty, or dingy spaces, in a considerable contrast to the spaces for white veterans. White offices boasted abundant seating and advertised skilled jobs that urgently needed to be filled. Black offices had room for only a few patrons, and seldom even had a place to post job notices. White veterans entered from the front, while black entryways were in back allies. African Americans unaware of the drill suffered “delay and embarrassment by appearing at the white office and being directed around to the back.”<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Southern Regional Council, “Services to Negro Veterans in the South,” n.d., in Southern Regional Council Papers, Series VII: Veteran’s Service Project, 1944-1951, Reel 189, VII: 32. The Southern Regional Council Papers, 1944-1968, microfilm, pp.1-5.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 4-5.

The VA functioned much the same. In 1946 President Truman wrote to General Omar Bradley, administrator of Veterans Affairs, to ensure that the VA safeguarded against a system of recruitment or placement that discriminated because of race or creed.<sup>59</sup> Despite this charge, VA administrators did little to advance black veteran's employment. In 1947 the National Urban League charged that the Veterans Administration failed to hire black veterans on its staffs in the South.<sup>60</sup> The NAACP conducted similar investigations, looking into local branch offices to find out how many African American personnel the Administration employed.<sup>61</sup> The Baltimore office of the NAACP found that in Maryland the Veterans Administration employed eight hundred veterans' personnel, only twenty-two of whom were African American.<sup>62</sup> Chicago's office had sixteen percent African American veterans, a higher number than most.<sup>63</sup> The VA emphasized an absence of discrimination in its dealings with veterans, arguing that it did not break down reports or statistics into categories of race—"all veterans are the same to us," said one public relations officer.<sup>64</sup> The organization's refusal to acknowledge discrimination for

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<sup>59</sup> President Harry S. Truman, letter to General Omar Bradley, 3 Jan 1946. In *Public Papers of the Presidents, Harry S. Truman, 1945-1953*, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum, <  
<http://www.trumanlibrary.org/publicpapers/index.php?pid=1443&st=&st1=>.

<sup>60</sup> Major Robinson, "Urban League Charges VA fails to Hire Vets on Dixie Staffs," in *The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967)*. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender 91910-1975) p. 1.

<sup>61</sup> Letter, Jesse O. Dedmon to Mr. Addison V. Pinkney, 5 Mar 1947, folder 11 Employment of Negro Vets Survey, box II:G9; Part II Veterans Affairs File, 1940-1950; MS 34140 Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>62</sup> Letter, Addison V. Pinkney to Jesse O. Dedmon, 3 Apr 1947, folder 11, box II:G9; Part II Veterans Affairs File, 1940-1950; MS 34140 Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>63</sup> Letter, Robert Beer to Henry McGee, President NAACP Chicago, 18 Mar 1947, folder 11 Employment of Negro Vets Survey, box II:G9; Part II Veterans Affairs File, 1940-1950; MS 34140 Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>64</sup> Ernestine Holt, "Is the Veterans Administration Rehabilitating the Colored Vet?" in *The Pittsburgh Courier (1911-1950)*; Jun 22, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Pittsburgh Courier (1911-2002), p. 2; VA Cannot Cite Number of Disabled Negro Veterans: Is Administration Protecting Vets?" in *The Pittsburgh Courier (1911-1950)*; Aug 10, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Pittsburgh Courier (1911-2002), p. 14.

black veterans led to ineffective rehabilitation efforts. In addition, the VA generally refused to privilege federal policy over state law.<sup>65</sup> Hiring practices like those in the Baltimore VA became all too frequent throughout the country.

The United States Department of Labor's Retraining and Reemployment Administration similarly failed to offer practical advice or rehabilitation for African-American veterans. The Retraining Administration issued monthly bulletins for veterans to better understand the services available, veterans' rights, and general tips on re-assimilation into civilian society. These bulletins consisted of articles on topics like veterans acquiring low-cost suits, or United States Employment Center locations.<sup>66</sup> These announcements failed to note, however, that a suit sale for veterans in Virginia likely had no intention of selling clothing to black customers.

More educated black veterans had trouble finding suitable employment as well. While many were unable to get work in their chosen fields, it seemed they could generally find work at the post office. Many African-American veterans worked for the postal service in the postwar period. As historian Philip F. Rubio argued, the jobs mediated the relationship between the black middle and working classes, placing both into positions where they exercised more community service and activism in the labor movement and black freedom struggle. African Americans used careers as postal workers to increase their social mobility.<sup>67</sup> Percy Sutton served as an intelligence officer with the Tuskegee Airmen in the Mediterranean. When he came home, he entered Columbia Law School, but ended up transferring to Brooklyn Law School so he could

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<sup>65</sup> Gambone, *The Greatest Generation Comes Home*, 118-119.

<sup>66</sup> Bulletin No. 34, Issued by Division of Public Information, Retraining and Reemployment Administration, United States Department of Labor, 7 Nov 1946, Washington, D.C., in Southern Regional Council Papers, Series VII: Veteran's Service Project, 1944-1951, Reel 188, VII: 33. The Southern Regional Council Papers, 1944-1968, microfilm.

<sup>67</sup> Philip F. Rubio, *There's Always Work at the Post Office: African American Postal Workers and the Fight for Jobs, Justice, and Equality* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 7.

work two jobs—one at the post office from 4 P.M. until midnight, and the second as a subway conductor until 8:30 in the morning. At 9:30 A.M., he went to his classes.<sup>68</sup> Coleman Young of the 477<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group and his brother later started the Postal Workers Union. Veterans like Westley Wallace Law, Amzie Moore, and Hiram Little worked at the Post Office as well.<sup>69</sup> Army veteran Damon J. Keith recalled that when he came out of law school in the late 1940s, things were very difficult for black lawyers. It was “not uncommon to find black lawyers working all night at the post office and other places and trying to practice law during the day.”<sup>70</sup>

Veterans of both races likewise had trouble finding available housing upon their return. Mass wartime migration led to increased urbanization and concentration in Northern cities. Black veterans often relocated postwar as well. For black soldiers separating from service, just over sixty percent were reported to have definitive plans to return to the South.<sup>71</sup> Migration led to a host of problems for African Americans leaving the South. While defense work might be more readily available in northern cities like Detroit or Chicago, individuals experiencing rapid social change could also suffer from “social disorganization.” Sociologist Preston H. Smith explained that individuals migrating to new places might have a tendency to engage in anti-social behaviors. In Chicago, this “social disorganization” manifested in social problems such as juvenile delinquency. Poor black migrants had difficulty adjusting to large cities like Chicago,

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<sup>68</sup> Douglas Martin, “Percy E. Sutton, Eminent Politician and Lawyer to Malcolm X, Dies at 89,” *New York Times*, December 28, 2009, A23.

<sup>69</sup> Rubio, *There’s Always Work at the Post Office*, 2-3.

<sup>70</sup> Damon J. Keith, “Reminiscences of Detroit’s Black Legal Heritage,” Speech, 127<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference, Historical Society of Michigan, 6 Oct 2001, folder 7, box 32; Damon J. Keith Papers, Accession #1582; Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit, MI; Interview, Judge Damon J. Keith by Detroit Pockets of Cool, 1 March 2012. YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EFQoRDfOf60>

<sup>71</sup> Memo, “Tables Concerning the Plans of Negro GIs,” Table A: Expected Post-War Migration Status of Negro Enlisted Men Classified by Region of Pre-War Residence (percentage distribution), not dated, on Atlanta Negro YMCA, Surveys/Tables from Army Service Forces. Series VII: Veteran’s Service Project, 1944-1951, Reel 188, VII: 23. The Southern Regional Council Papers, 1944-1968, microfilm.

and residential segregation led to problems like overcrowding and poor housing conditions.<sup>72</sup> While these problems existed during the war, the influx of returning veterans magnified problems such as unemployment and poverty. The emergency housing units designated for returning veterans often rejected black veterans, or incited violence from surrounding communities unhappy with the prospect of mixed housing units. Investigating the situation, the NAACP discovered that black veterans in certain communities were not receiving loans for businesses and homes as readily as white veterans. The VA attributed this to the failure of the lending institutions to certify the black veterans as qualified for these loans.<sup>73</sup> For black veterans, the process of re-assimilation was bursting with economic and psychological hardships.

In perhaps one of the most abhorrent elements of the postwar readjustment, 1946 touched off a wave of violence against returning black veterans. The attacks and riots never reached the level of 1919's Red Summer. African Americans had gained some economic and political traction during the Second World War, acquiring increased voting rights and protection under the law.<sup>74</sup> But in some of the more volatile regions in the South, mob violence escalated unchecked, often attributed to leadership such as Senator Theodore Bilbo of Mississippi or the Talmadges of Georgia.<sup>75</sup> In June 1946, Bilbo called on "every red-blooded Anglo-Saxon in Mississippi to

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<sup>72</sup> Preston H. Smith II, *Racial Democracy and the Black Metropolis: Housing Policy in Postwar Chicago* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 2.

<sup>73</sup> "Report of Activities of the Secretary of Veterans' Affairs," Feb 1947, folder 5 Camp Investigations N-P, Box II:G2; Part II Veterans Affairs File, 1940-1950; MS 34140 Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>74</sup> MacGregor, *Integration of the Armed Forces, 1940-1965*, 124-125.

<sup>75</sup> Herman Talmadge served as governor of Georgia briefly in 1947 when his father, Governor Eugene Talmadge passed away. As Eugene Talmadge ran unopposed in 1946, the party arranged to have Herman written in to become the second place finisher. The Talmadges made the federal courts' invalidation of the white primary a key campaign issue, and pledged to protect segregation. When Eugene Talmadge died in December 1946, Herman, Melvin E. Thompson (Lieutenant Governor), and Ellis Arnall (GA Governor 1942-1946) were all sworn in as governor for a brief stint. When the state declared this unconstitutional, Talmadge ran and won and served 1948-1950, and again 1950-1954.

resort to any means to keep Negroes from the polls.” “If you don’t know what this means,” he added, “You are just not up on your persuasive measures.”<sup>76</sup>

In July 1946, the *Chicago Defender* reported the first lynching in the South for a year. An altercation between a white farmer and a black employee, Roger Malcom, resulted in a quadruple murder in Monroe, Georgia. When the argument escalated, Malcom allegedly stabbed the farmer, but not fatally. Ten days later, another white farmer posted bail for Malcom. The farmer drove black veteran George Dorsey, just returned from the Pacific, Dorsey’s wife, and Malcom and his wife back to his farm. They avoided the main highway. Near a bridge over the Appalachian River, a mob of twenty to thirty white citizens blocked the road. Cars and people poured from the underbrush, pulling Malcom and Dorsey from the car and binding them before taking them to a glade and killing them. The mob then returned for the two women, who cowered fearfully in the car. One of the women identified several members of the mob, pleading for their lives, and the mob leader had them pulled out of the car and killed as well.<sup>77</sup> The mob reportedly lined victims up and shot them in front of a firing squad. The coroner estimated that sixty bullets riddled the four young African Americans.<sup>78</sup>

After the murders, the black press broadcasted the violence around the country. Within weeks, “a flood of protests flowed into the White House,” reported the *Baltimore Afro-American*, as protesters demanded that President Truman bring the perpetrators to justice. New York

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<sup>76</sup> “Bilbo Screams Mob Violence: Demands Whites Keep Negroes From Polls,” in *The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967)*; Jun 29, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975), p. 1.

<sup>77</sup> “Defender Vows to Fight Until Lynch Evil Dies: Four Negroes Murdered by Georgia Mob; Horror Sweeps Nation,” in *The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967)*; Aug 3, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975), p. 1.

<sup>78</sup> James Edmund Boyack, “Georgia ‘Mass Murders’: Monroe Massacre Hocks Nation; Protest Pour in,” in *The Pittsburgh Courier (1911-1950)*; Aug 3 1946; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Pittsburgh Courier (1910-2002), p. 1; Laura Wexler, *Fire in a Canebrake: The Last Mass Lynching in America* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 66.

congressmen Adam Clayton Powell and Vito Marcantonio urged federal action and intervention in Georgia, and the Southern Negro Youth Congress demanded an investigation. The Southern Regional Council and other groups offered rewards for anyone providing information leading to the identification of the lynchers.<sup>79</sup> Mass demonstrations increased as the black community demanded the arrest and conviction of the murders and anti-lynching laws. In New York an estimated 15,000 citizens protested the murders in Madison Square Park under the direction of the National Negro Congress and the United Negro and Allied Veterans of America (UNAVA). San Franciscans and residents of several other cities on the West Coast conducted silent parades, some with coffins and effigies, expressing their censure for the brutality.<sup>80</sup> The UNAVA, the American Veterans Committee, the CIO, and the NAACP co-sponsored a similar demonstration in Washington, D.C.<sup>81</sup> Both foreign papers and state legislatures condemned the murders; Russian papers ran accounts of the lynching and a Paris Youth organization called on Secretary of State James Byrnes to take action against the “rising tide of fascist terror.”<sup>82</sup>

The next month, two veterans’ bodies surfaced in Texas. One man had a slashed throat, the other had been strangled and both badly beaten. Richard Gordon, one of the veterans, had been dragged from the rear of an automobile and down the road. Marshall, Texas authorities maintained that the deaths had no relation to mob action. The *Defender* alleged that local law

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<sup>79</sup> “Georgia Massacre Arouses Nation; Action Demanded,” in *Afro-American (1893-1988)*; Aug 3, 1946; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Baltimore Afro-American (1893-1988), p. 1.

<sup>80</sup> “Protests Grow as Hate Shock Grips Nation,” *The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967)*; Aug 10, 1946; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975), p. 1.

<sup>81</sup> “Sunshine and Innocent Blood,” *The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967)*; Aug 17, 1946; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975), p. 2.

<sup>82</sup> “Protests Grow as Hate Shock Grips Nation,” *The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967)*; Aug 10, 1946; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975), p. 1.

enforcement had conspired with the mob.<sup>83</sup> In Minden, Louisiana, a group of six whites attacked two African Americans, veteran John Jones and his thirteen year old cousin. The mob beat the thirteen year old unconscious and then set upon Jones, attempting to obtain a confession for insulting a white woman. They applied a blow torch to Jones' body and then beat him mercilessly. When they failed to obtain a confession, they shot and killed him.<sup>84</sup>

In Atlanta, Georgia, hooded men flogged an African-American Navy veteran in early 1946. The attack prompted then Governor Ellis Arnall to take action against the Klan in Georgia.<sup>85</sup> When the Talmadges assumed office, however, actions against mob and racial violence largely ceased. In the case of the Monroe murders, Arnall offered a reward for information leading to arrests of those involved. Referencing the Monroe violence, Talmadge remarked, "Such incidents are to be regretted."<sup>86</sup> When Eugene Talmadge assumed governorship again, investigation into these murders slowed to a halt.<sup>87</sup> In Mississippi, leading up to Senator Bilbo's last reelection in November 1946, the violence spread. A veteran in Puckett, Mississippi, was flogged and threatened with death for attempting to vote in the

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<sup>83</sup> "Lynch Toll Soars to 12 Since Monroe Slaughter," in *The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967)*; Aug 31, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975), p. 1.

<sup>84</sup> "U.S. Court Charges Mob in Vet Slaying: Hold Louisiana Official Killers On Federal Counts," in *The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967)*; Nov 16, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975), p. 1; "Funds Needed to Combat Mounting Mob Violence," in the *Afro-American (1893-1988)*; Aug 31, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Baltimore Afro-American (1893-1988), p. 9.

<sup>85</sup> "Murder, Flogging Spurs Drive on Clan," in *The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967)*; Jun 15, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975), p. 1; "Georgia Files Suit Against Ku Klux Klan," in *The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967)*; Jun 29, 1946. ProQuest Historical newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975), p. 1.

<sup>86</sup> James Edmund Boyack, "Georgia 'Mass Murders': Monroe Massacre Hocks Nation; Protest Pour in," in *The Pittsburgh Courier (1911-1950)*; Aug 3 1946; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Pittsburgh Courier (1910-2002), p. 1.

<sup>87</sup> "Monroe Probe Lags as Talmadge Rises to Power," in *The Chicago Defender (National edition)(1921-1967)*; Sep 14, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975), p. 3.

primary.<sup>88</sup> Reports cited white resentment toward black veterans, a determination to keep African Americans from the polls, efforts to stop labor organizers, and a flare-up of the Ku Klux Klan as key factors in this Mississippi reign of terror.<sup>89</sup>

As black and white veterans arrived home, they had the capacity to take up leadership roles in the community. Civilians feared veterans of both races because of their supposed clannishness and tendency toward violent resolutions. A 1946 veteran's rebellion in Athens, Tennessee set the tenor for this relationship. White and black veterans, angered by potential political corruption, battled local police for control of the political system and installed new leadership. Apprehensive of veterans in general, many Americans feared black veterans even more, concerned that they would return home bitter and willing to use violence as a form of protest.<sup>90</sup> As a result, a violent white backlash swept the country, particularly the Deep South, in 1946.

Perhaps the most infamous incident occurred in February, 1946 in South Carolina. Sergeant Isaac Woodard had just arrived home after fifteen months laboring in the Philippines and New Guinea.<sup>91</sup> Discharged at Camp Gordon, Georgia, Woodard was traveling home to

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<sup>88</sup> "Flogging, Shooting Spread Mississippi Terror: Senate Disturbed Over Bilbo's Race Ravings," in *The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967)*; Jul 6, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975), p. 1.

<sup>89</sup> Samuel Hoskins, "Clerics, Teacher Beaten; Girls Attacked in Reign of Terror After Mississippi Manhunt," the *Afro-American (1893-1988)*; Aug 31, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Baltimore Afro-American (1893-1988), p. 1.

<sup>90</sup> Robert Francis Saxe, *Settling Down: World War II Veterans Challenge to the Postwar Consensus* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 58, 169.

<sup>91</sup> "Vet Blinded by Cops: Eyes Are Gouged Out by Savage Policemen, Holder of Battle Star Suffers All Night in Cell Without Treatment," in the *Afro-American (1893-1988)*; Jul 20, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Baltimore Afro-American (1893-1988), pg. 1; Isaac Woodard, Separation Qualification Record, 12 Feb 1946. Army Qualification Record, Reel 29, Frames 231-232. "Resonant Ripples in a Global Pond: The Blinding of Isaac Woodard," Isaac Woodard Documents, University of South Carolina Upstate, , <http://faculty.uscupstate.edu/amyers/woodard.html>.

South Carolina, still in uniform. An hour outside of Batesburg, the driver stopped and Woodard asked to get off the bus and use the facilities. “Hell no,” responded the driver, “Goddamn it, go back and sit down. I ain’t got time to wait.” Woodard’s temper flared, and he retorted, “Talk to me like I am talking to you. I am a man just like you.” The driver relented, instructing Woodard to go and hurry back, saying nothing more about it. When the bus pulled into Batesburg the driver stepped out, and when he returned he approached Woodard and asked him to step outside, someone wanted to see him. Two policemen waited. The driver told them that the soldier had created a disturbance, and would not be allowed to ride further. Woodard spoke up, explaining what happened when one policeman hit him across the head with a club, telling him to shut up. “So I hushed,” accounted Woodard. They walked him around the corner, asking him if he had been discharged. When he answered yes, the men said, “Say Yes, sir,” and when he did they commenced beating him. “I had to do something,” he explained. “So I grabbed his billy and wrung it out of his hand, and when I did that some other officer threw a revolver in my back.” He dropped the club, the officers walked him to the jail and began beating him again. The police beat Woodard until he lost consciousness. When he woke up, they began beating him again. “He had the end of his billy driving it into my eyeballs,” Woodard later testified. When Isaac Woodard woke up in the morning, his sight was gone.”<sup>92</sup>

That morning, a judge in Aiken, South Carolina fined Woodard fifty dollars for creating a disturbance. The officers with custody of Woodard claimed he was drunk and disorderly. Even after Woodard gave the judge his version of events, the judge responded “We don’t have that kind of stuff down here.” Later that night, the police took him to a Veteran’s hospital in

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<sup>92</sup> Isaac Woodard Sworn Testimony for Civil Lawsuit, November 1947, NAACP Papers, Reel 30, Frames 121-133. in “resonant Ripples in a Global Pond: The Blinding of Isaac Woodard,” Isaac Woodard Documents, University of South Carolina Upstate, , <http://faculty.uscupstate.edu/myers/woodard.html>, accessed 01/04/2014.

Greensboro, SC. Woodard spent two months in the hospital, and then moved to live with family in New York.<sup>93</sup>

The case did not find the national spotlight until Woodard approached the NAACP a few months later. Walter White, executive secretary of the NAACP, met with Woodard as the organization commenced legal action. Woodard's cousin led him into White's office, and the veteran said, "I saw you, Mr. White, when you visited my outfit in the Pacific. I could see *then*." Representatives of several organizations gathered to hear the veteran's story. White reassured Woodard, apprehensive of making a speech, that he should just relate the facts. "It was one of the most moving speeches I have ever heard," wrote White. "[Woodard] told of the long and trying months in the Pacific and how eagerly he had looked forward to the end of the war when he could rejoin his family and resume normal civilian life. His voice swelled with modest pride as he told of receiving and reading his honorable discharge from the Army." Woodard related his story without bitterness or self-pity, in a voice almost devoid of emotion, wrote White. "And we suffered with him the agony he endured during the unmerciful beating, the long night of pain . . . and his utmost despair when he was told that he would be blind the rest of his life."<sup>94</sup>

The mainstream media hailed returning American troops as heroes, but for the majority of Americans, the typical American soldier was white. In newspapers, movies, and music, the normalization of the American fighting man as white gave whites the justification to deny the benefits of that veteran status to African Americans. The black press highlighted the veteran status of the victims of white violence in the immediate postwar period. Papers like the

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<sup>93</sup> Isaac Woodard Deposition, 23 April 1946. NAACP Papers, Reel 28, Frames 1012-1013. "Resonant Ripples in a Global Pond: The Blinding of Isaac Woodard," Isaac Woodard Documents, University of South Carolina Upstate, , <http://faculty.uscupstate.edu/amyers/woodard.html>, accessed 01/04/2014.

<sup>94</sup> Walter White, *A Man Called White: The Autobiography of Walter White* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1948), 327-328.

*Baltimore Afro-American*, the *Chicago Defender*, and the *Pittsburgh Courier* dramatized the disparaging and abusive treatment of the African American veterans as they returned home, using these incidents as a rallying point for the cause of civil rights.<sup>95</sup> *Chicago Defender* journalist, Enoc P. Waters, Jr., hypothesized that the violence occurred most often where progressive forces were in action in the South, marked by a new assertiveness among the black population. As whites failed to “check the rising assertiveness of Negroes,” their frustration manifested with violence. The black veteran, he explained, “is the element most feared by Southern reactionaries.”<sup>96</sup> Executive Secretary of the NAACP, Walter White wrote that a dread epidemic swept the country and especially the Deep South in 1946. As Thomas Wolfe described Nazi Germany in the 1930s as a nation “infested with the contagion of an ever present fear,” wrote White, so too did the United States suffer from the same insecurities in the 1946 wave of barbarity. The rising tide of violence had the potential to inundate and destroy America, he argued.<sup>97</sup> Black veterans represented a threat, and in uniform they represented a challenge to the image of the returning American hero. Hosea Williams attempted to drink from a white water fountain in Georgia in uniform and a group of beat him nearly to death. “I lay in the hospital for eight weeks wishing that Adolf Hitler had won the war,” recalled Williams.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid, 174.

<sup>96</sup> Enoc P. Waters, Jr., “Ignorance Rivals Brutality in Lynchers: Look Closely, Appeasers!” in *The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967)*; Aug 24, 1946; ProQuest Historical newspapers: *Chicago Defender (1910-1975)*, p. 13.

<sup>97</sup> Walter White, “People, Politics, and Places: Nation in Fear,” in *The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967)*; Aug 17, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *Chicago Defender (1910-1975)*, pg. 15; Walter White, “People, Politics, and Places: Dread Epidemic,” in *The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967)*; Sep 14, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *Chicago Defender(1910-1975)*, p. 15.

<sup>98</sup> Richard Wormser, “Hosea Williams: 1926-2000,” in “The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow,” *Public Broadcasting System*, 2002, accessed March 27, 2013, [http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/stories\\_people\\_will.html](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/stories_people_will.html).

As the black and white media battled over the image of the returning veteran, black reformers used the violence against and victimization of black veterans to induce political change. With a new administration in place and a transforming military establishment, reformers had an opening to challenge both the postwar violence and the future of African Americans in the military. They used Truman's anxieties about postwar violence, the defense establishment's concerns about manpower, and the budding cold war to push for change. Their methods represented a departure from previous forms of black activism. Although anti-lynching laws never came to fruition, the activism in the postwar period, strongly premised on the wartime contributions of black veterans, directly influenced President Truman's 1948 order to desegregate the military.

In the war's aftermath, President Truman became increasingly concerned about the reemergence of the Ku Klux Klan and the string of violence against African Americans.<sup>99</sup> The Ku Klux Klan had resurged in Georgia, and the Association of Georgia Klans was estimated at about twenty-thousand for metropolitan Atlanta and between forty and fifty thousand in the state overall. While the Klan likely exaggerated these figures, they experienced a rebirth in Georgia

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<sup>99</sup> President Harry Truman, Sound Recording 1963, in Raymond H. Gesselbracht, "The Truman Library and Truman's Civil Rights Legacy," Raymond H. Gesselbracht, ed., *The Civil Rights Legacy of Harry S. Truman* (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2007), 145-146; MacGregor, *Integration of the Armed Forces*, 292-293; Michael R. Gardner, *Harry Truman and Civil Rights*, 20-21; Raymond H. Gesselbracht, "Interpreting the Civil Rights Legacy of Harry S. Truman," in *The Civil Rights Legacy of Harry S. Truman*, ed Raymond H. Gesselbracht (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press) xiii-xiv, xxi, 143; Ken Hechler, "Truman Laid the Foundation for the Civil Rights Movement," in *The Civil Rights Legacy of Harry S. Truman*, ed Raymond H. Gesselbracht (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press), 56. President Truman left a curious civil rights legacy. It appears that he did not understand the full scope of African-American demands, but he did demonstrate an awareness of the connection between civil rights for black Americans and civil liberties for all American. Historians have long disagreed on the President's civil rights legacy. Some have opined that the President truly took the civil rights agenda as a moral imperative. Others argued that Truman's civil rights actions were political calculations. A more recent school of thought on Truman and civil rights argues that geopolitical aspirations helped shape the president's civil rights policies. While he may not have pursued a civil rights agenda too forcefully, he did take some important actions asserting the responsibility of the federal government to ensure civil rights, while politically speaking, Truman might have been better off steering clear of these issues.

as the black vote became an important issue in for the 1946 gubernatorial election, and as the CIO and AFL opened up unionization drives in the South.<sup>100</sup>

The president met with Walter White and a delegation from the NAACP in September 1946 about the situation. White described the lynchings, and the anti-Semitic, anti-labor, and anti-immigrant rhetoric emerging from a number of hate organizations in the United States. He told the President Isaac Woodard's story as well. When White finished, Truman exclaimed, "My God! I had no idea it was as terrible as that! We've got to do something!" The delegation debated the best approach to the problem, and Assistant to the President, David K. Niles suggested that they form a President's Committee on Civil Rights to investigate the subject. White and the NAACP delegation worried about congressional delays in the establishment of a commission, but Truman agreed to form it through executive order, funding it through the President's contingent fund to avoid this obstacle. Another NAACP delegate objected that the time consuming creation of this committee could still delay action too long to provide for the safety of African Americans.<sup>101</sup> Despite these objections, Truman pressed forward with the committee, charging it to have a report prepared by January of the next year. The NAACP delegation recommended that the committee members should represent a broad spectrum of American political thought. The committee could have little impact on public opinion if composed wholly or even predominantly of "especially interested persons."<sup>102</sup>

Accordingly, the committee made its report to the President in 1947, recommending a number of changes to close the gap between rhetoric and reality of American democracy.

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<sup>100</sup> William M. Blair, "Report from the Nation: The Trends in Six Sections of the Country," George Hatcher, "The Southeast," *New York Times* (1923-Current file); May 19, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2009), p. E6. Each region was covered by different journalist.

<sup>101</sup> White, *A Man Called White*, 330-332.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

Continued prosperity in a world market necessitated a better use of all potential manpower. Discrimination imposed a huge cost on the American economy through the duplication of facilities and services necessary to maintain “separate but equal.” The committee recommended that Congress enact legislation to strengthen personal protections, including a new statute specifically against police brutality and related crimes, and the enactment of federal anti-lynching laws.<sup>103</sup> Much of this was already under consideration in Congress, complained some in the black press. The report contained too many legislative suggestions “calculated not to ruffle Southern feathers.”<sup>104</sup>

In spite of the President’s interactions with civil rights organizations, his assurances of his commitment to civil liberties, and the recommendations of the committee, the federal government did not do a great deal in the late 1940s to protect the civil liberties of African Americans.<sup>105</sup> Without direct intervention from the president, as in the case of military desegregation or with some local cases of violence, the federal government often played the role of disinterested bystander. When it came to the military, the newly formed National Military Establishment was still finding its legs. First Secretary of Defense James Forrestal, so successful in his World War II integration experiments with the Navy, assumed office unconvinced of his authority to regulate the military establishment. Seeking a middle route, Forrestal assumed a

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<sup>103</sup> President’s Committee on Civil Rights, *To Secure These Rights*, 139-172.

<sup>104</sup> Louis Lautier, “Civil Rights Committee Report Said to Be Weak: Rumored to Contain Only Recommendations for Legislation Already Being Considered,” the *Afro-American (1893-1988)*; Oct 4, 1947. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: the Baltimore Afro-American (1893-1988) p. 13.

<sup>105</sup> Harry S. Truman, “Address Before the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People,” 29 June 1947, in *The Civil Rights Legacy of Harry S. Truman*, Raymond Geselbracht, ed., Appendix A, 152-155. Truman became the first president to address the NAACP, pledging his full support to civil rights. He stated that the attack on prejudice and discrimination would no longer be leisurely or dictated by the states, and that too many Americans still faced the threat of insult and violence.

passive role and let the individual services dictate racial policy.<sup>106</sup> The Civil Rights Section in the Department of Justice was not structurally equipped to make the changes the president desired either. A decade after its inception, the Civil Rights Section only had six attorneys, and often up to 20,000 allegations of civil rights violations in a given year.<sup>107</sup> The impotency of its interventions in violence against black veterans often resulted in the acquittal of white defendants, demonstrating its inability to defend civil rights.

In the case of Isaac Woodard, President Truman stepped in and instructed the Attorney General, Tom Clark, to initiate a Department of Justice investigation, filing criminal charges against the Batesburg Chief of Police for beating and torturing Woodard. Linwood Shull stood trial for violating the veteran's civil rights. Police and authorities in Batesburg alleged that Woodard was drunk and disorderly, some even claiming that the veteran was not actually blinded. Both black and white passengers on the Greyhound bus denied charges against Woodard, however, refuting any disorder on the bus. Five ex-servicemen, three white and two black, testified in Woodard's defense.<sup>108</sup> Tensions in South Carolina ran high, white authorities denouncing the federal government's intervention and said that Shull only acted "in discharge of his duties." In November 1946, an all-white jury took only thirty minutes to acquit Shull. They found no evidence that Woodard's civil rights had been violated.<sup>109</sup> Despite the executive efforts

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<sup>106</sup> MacGregor, *Integration of the Armed Forces*, 299-300.

<sup>107</sup> Carol Anderson, "Clutching At Civil Rights Straws: A Reappraisal of the Truman Years and the Struggle for African American Citizenship," in *The Civil Rights Legacy of Harry S. Truman*, Raymond H. Geselbracht, ed., 34.

<sup>108</sup> "Ex-GI Buddies Backing Isaac Woodard In Damage Suit: Not Blinded, Admitted Being Drunk, Town Mayor Says of Police Victim," in *The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967)*; Nov 22, 1947. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975), p. 3; Ollie Stewart, "Acquit Eye-Gouging Cop: Eye-Gouging Cop Acquitted, All-White Jury Out Only Thirty Minutes," in the *Afro-American (1893-1988)*; Nov 16, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Baltimore Afro-American (1893-1988), p. 1.

<sup>109</sup> Ollie Stewart, "Acquit Eye-Gouging Cop: Eye-Gouging Cop Acquitted, All-White Jury Out Only Thirty Minutes," in the *Afro-American (1893-1988)*; Nov 16, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Baltimore Afro-American (1893-1988), p. 1.

to increase the protection of civil liberties, violence against African Americans still had few repercussions for white perpetrators. To prompt federal action and protect black veterans against violence, reformers juxtaposed that military service with their treatment, and employed it politically. When the black press publicized the atrocities committed against black veterans and black servicemen, it provided activists with leverage, which they used to capture the President's attention.

With the war fresh on everyone's mind, black activists increased their efforts to desegregate the military in the immediate postwar period. They initially predicated these efforts on the strength of African-American service in World War II.<sup>110</sup> The military's misemployment of black troops during the war highlighted the status of African Americans as second-class citizens and the fallacy of equating military service with citizenship. These participation policies shaped the African American community's views on military service, and military racism was perhaps even more resented than the discrimination against black civilians.<sup>111</sup> A. Philip Randolph, President of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, referred to a segregated military in the Second World War as "the war's greatest scandal."<sup>112</sup> A range of groups, from the more radical Committee Against Jim Crow in Military Service and Training to the NAACP adopted more aggressive tactics to press for military desegregation.

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<sup>110</sup> Christine Knauer, *Let Us Fight As Free Men: Black Soldiers and Civil Rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014). This book will be released May 2014, and Knauer's focus on black soldiers and civilian efforts toward military desegregation should substantially help clarify the role that black soldiers and civilian activists played on the movement, as well as the ways these activists employed that World War II military service affected their methods and rhetoric.

<sup>111</sup> Ronald Krebs, *Fighting for Rights*, 149-150.

<sup>112</sup> Kimberley L. Phillips, "'Did the Battlefield Kill Jim Crow?': The Cold War Military, Civil Rights, and Black Freedom Struggles," in Kevin M. Kruse and Stephen Tuck, ed., *Fog of War: The Second World War and the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 208.

As the military formulated policy for the postwar utilization of African-American troops, black activists capitalized on veterans' wartime experiences in their quest to reshape the institution. They attempted to ensure fair representation, the promotion and employment of competent black officers and noncommissioned officers, and access to all military specialties. Arguing that the African-American serviceman's experience highlighted the connection between discrimination and low morale, they pressed for a revised racial policy. A rise in racial tension in the military mirrored the violence and conflict of 1946 in the civilian world. After the Isaac Woodard incident, the NAACP charged that the Army could not even protect its own members.<sup>113</sup>

Just as activists used the political power of the black World War II military experiences in a variety of ways, they often disagreed over the implications of this military service. Some assumed a more radical position in the postwar period. A. Philip Randolph had begun concentrating on military desegregation in his 1943 March on Washington Movement conference. In the postwar years he worked closely with Grant Reynolds, a World War II Army chaplain who resigned after four years in the military to protest the racism he encountered. Reynolds also worked as an administrative assistant for the Washington NAACP, but left that position in 1944, desiring greater freedom to protest the mistreatment of black troops.<sup>114</sup> Randolph and Reynolds formed two organizations in their campaign for military desegregation: the Committee Against Jim Crow in Military Service and Training and the League for Non-Violent Civil Disobedience. The pair encouraged black youth to refuse to join a segregated

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<sup>113</sup> MacGregor, *Integration of the Armed Forces*, 128-130. While in 1945 the question of the military's ability to combat off-base discrimination had not yet emerged, the growing racial tensions on military bases indicated that they needed to find new methods to enforce their non-discrimination policies.

<sup>114</sup> "Reynolds Quits NAACP Position," *The Pittsburgh Courier (1911-1950)*; Oct 14, 1944. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Pittsburgh Courier (1911-2002), p. 1.

military or register for Selective Service.<sup>115</sup> Their campaign became more important in March, 1948 when President Truman sponsored an agenda for universal military training. That month, Grant Reynolds testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee arguing that most white Americans had little idea of the physical and psychological abuse that African-American troops endured. He maintained that Republican senators had failed to carry out their 1944 party commitment to thoroughly investigate the cases of mistreatment throughout the war. It seemed unlikely to him that they would do so before voting on Selective Service and Universal Military Training.<sup>116</sup> The Committee Against Jim Crow in Military Service and Training continued setting up commissions of inquiry to determine the effects of discrimination and segregation to morale, and bring them to policymakers' attention.<sup>117</sup> Randolph and Reynolds' efforts represented a new sort of reform, stressing mass action and civil disobedience. The pair threatened to recruit black veterans to join the civil disobedience movement "and to recruit their younger brothers in an organized refusal to register and be drafted."<sup>118</sup>

Their campaign demonstrated a divergence within the black community over the meaning of black military service. By-and-large, the black community did not endorse the more radical

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<sup>115</sup> Paula F. Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph, Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1996), 133-134; C.B. Powell, editor, NY Amsterdam News, "Reject Campaign of Civil Disobedience," in *New York Amsterdam News (1943-1961)*; Jul 24, 1948; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Amsterdam News (1922-1993), p. 1.

<sup>116</sup> Memo, Grant Reynolds and A. Philip Randolph, "Commission of Inquiry into the Effect of Discrimination and Segregation on the Morale and Development of Negro Soldiers," n.d. but attached to letter on 23 April 1948, asking Leslie Perry, NAACP, to serve on a commission, folder 7 General Correspondence Jan-Jun 1948, box II:G10; Part II Veterans Affairs File, 1940-1950; MS 34140 Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>117</sup> Pamphlet, *The Committee Against Jim Crow in Military Service and Training: Its Principles and Objectives*, n.d., in United Auto-Workers Fair Practices Department, folder 14 Desegregation; in military, public facilities, corresp., reports, memos, 1948-1953, box 8; UAW Fair Practices Department; Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

<sup>118</sup> Quoted in MacGregor, *Integration of the Armed Forces*, 124, 303.

position, but refrained from criticizing the movement and strongly supported military desegregation. As more conservative groups like the NAACP rejected civil disobedience, educated young African Americans of draft age overwhelmingly, some seventy-one percent, supported the campaign. Although the threat of civil disobedience had little effect on the President or Congress, it informed the methods the black community employed to battle military segregation.<sup>119</sup> In the postwar period, many reformers pointed out that military segregation and refusal to properly utilize black troops had called black Americanism into question.<sup>120</sup> Some African-American reformers like Randolph and Reynolds urged a more radical stance against that official relegation to second-class citizenship through military segregation. Others groups, including many in the black press, continued to remind the black community that “America belongs to the Negro, as it does to other segments of the population. America is his to hold and defend from all enemies in time of war or peace.”<sup>121</sup>

As in the prewar mobilization, the question of double consciousness and the connection between black identity and American identity emerged. African-American participation in the Second World War merely amplified that dilemma and the black community was enraged by that wartime treatment. Reformers in the black community disagreed over the stake that African Americans held in the country and its defense and vowed that they would no longer brook that sort of hypocritical action. When Truman issued his executive order to desegregate in July 1948, Randolph and Reynolds rescinded their call for civil disobedience, though other more

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid, 304-306.

<sup>120</sup> Krebs, *Fighting for Rights*, 149-150. Reformers on both side of the spectrum pointed this out, from NAACP officials to Randolph, noting that military segregation and mistreatment had relegated African Americans to a second-class citizenship on an official level.

<sup>121</sup> C.B. Powell, “Reject Campaign of Civil Disobedience,” in *New York Amsterdam News (1943-1961)*; Jul 24, 1948; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Amsterdam News (1922-1993), p. 1.

radical activists like Bayard Rustin held fast until the complete eradication of military segregation. Yet the question of Americanism, identity, and the stake of African Americans in the nation thrived in the postwar period as black veterans were continually slighted for their contributions. Most agreed that, as writer James Baldwin put it, “The story of the Negro in America is the story of America—or, more precisely, it is the story of Americans.”<sup>122</sup> Du Bois emphasized, “This is Our Country: we have worked for it, we have suffered for it, we have fought for it; we have made its music, we have tinged its ideals, its poetry, its religion, its dreams.”<sup>123</sup> Yet despite that pervasive admission of and claim to Americanness, the black community viewed the postwar backlashes as an attempt to keep it subservient. Its reform tactics demonstrated the ways the black community was questioning the logic linking military service and first-class citizenship.<sup>124</sup>

Black activists had another tool at their disposal in the emerging Cold War environment. African-American military service had projected an image of American hypocrisy and discrimination into the international sphere. Here, too, civil rights activists employed this tool to press for change. As one *Afro-American* journalist argued, the segregation of black troops throughout the world exposed the United States to much international criticism. Not only did Soviet propaganda seize on the domestic injustices within the U.S. as an indictment of the capitalist system, but the sympathies of the undeveloped world, much of it people of color, had

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<sup>122</sup> James Baldwin, *Notes of A Native Son* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1955), 18. Baldwin’s book brought together a series of essays he had published for *Harper’s Magazine* between 1949 and 1954.

<sup>123</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn* in *W.E.B. Du Bois: Writings* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1986), 740.

<sup>124</sup> Phillips, “Did the Battlefield Kill Jim Crow,” 210.

become particularly important as the superpowers vied for influence.<sup>125</sup> The criticism existed in Europe as well, and foreign press coverage of U.S. racial affairs poured into U.S. embassies throughout the Truman administration.<sup>126</sup>

The Cold War had the potential to both aid and hinder the black civil rights movement. In later years some groups employed Cold War rhetoric to stifle black veterans' voices; allegations of communism in Cold War America increasingly obstructed progressive efforts in the postwar period. Yet shortly after the war, black activists attempted to capitalize on this international image. In October 1947, the NAACP petitioned the United Nations for redress for denial of human rights in the United States. The UN had recently debated the treatment of blacks and minorities in countries like South Africa and Palestine. W.E.B. Du Bois and four scholars (three of them black and one Jewish) prepared a report on the status and history of black people in the United States. Two black committee members, Rayford R. Logan and Earl Dickson, had served in World War I, and the third, Robert Ming, was a World War II veteran.

Du Bois protested that the United States government continually cast its lot with imperial aggression throughout the world and withdrawn its sympathy from people of color and smaller nations. Rayford Logan laid out the premise of the appeal within the United Nations Charter, noting the group's human rights obligations. He reminded the UN of recent events in Germany, Poland, Central and Eastern Europe and the treatment of minorities in these places. In the first session of the Economic and Social Council, January 1946, M.F. Dehousse, the Belgian delegate, noted that “. . . if human rights are systematically denied or violated in one or other parts of the world; there can be no doubt that such a situation, with which we are only too well acquainted,

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<sup>125</sup> Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 35-36.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid*, 36.

will, after a more or less brief period of confusion and anarchy, lead again to war.” The NAACP argued that the violation of African American rights fell in this category of a universal violation of human rights and fundamental freedoms, very much within the boundaries stipulated by Dehousse.<sup>127</sup>

Robert Ming, an Air Force veteran and graduate of the University of Chicago law school, appealed to the UN with legal justifications. He cited the American creed as a dedication to equal justice under the law. Yet Americans made racial distinctions at every turn. African Americans had little to no legal redress against the violence in the postwar period, wrote Ming. A “callused disregard for human rights” frequently characterized the relationships between African Americans and lawmakers. The unjust and violent conduct (oftentimes by government officials) was all the more shocking because it usually went unpunished. With the disparity between state and federal law, the forty-nine states constituted forty-nine separate political sovereignties. So in the majority of cases it fell to local authorities to protect civil rights for minorities, something that very rarely occurred.<sup>128</sup>

The appeal received a great deal of coverage in both the American and international media. Eleanor Roosevelt, a member of the board of directors of the NAACP, also sat on the American delegation to the United Nations. She refused to introduce the petition, concerned that it might harm the American reputation in the international sphere. Although the Soviet Union suggested that the United Nations investigate the NAACP’s charges, the United Nations declined

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<sup>127</sup> Rayford W. Logan, “The Charter of the United Nations and its Provisions for Human Rights and the Rights of Minorities and Decisions Already Taken Under this Charter,” in *An Appeal to the World: A Statement on the Denial of Human Rights to Minorities in the Case of Citizens of Negro Descent in the United States of America and an Appeal to the United Nations for Redress*, ed. W.E. Burghardt Du Bois (New York, NY: The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 1947), 91.

<sup>128</sup> William R. Ming, Jr., “The Present Legal and Social Status of the American Negro,” in *An Appeal to the World*, ed. W.E. Burghardt Du Bois, 47-51.

to act. It had, however, stimulated some interest in discrimination in the United States, leading to U.S. concern that these racial problems could sway the pro or anti-communist leanings of other, developing nations. These concerns led to further American propaganda to counteract the effects of these negative impressions, and the federal government worked fervently throughout the Cold War to disseminate the “truth.”<sup>129</sup> The use of black veterans to emphasize these inequalities in the international sphere again stressed the important yet contested connection between military service and citizenship.

Despite the intensity of the backlash and the injustices that black veterans experienced as they returned home, their misfortune translated into some important reforms in the postwar period. As veterans and the black community came to terms with this postwar environment, they grappled with questions of identity, struggling to understand what the past four years and their contributions signified for the future. Violent white backlash, a lack of employment and housing, and legislation favoring white advancement blocked their aspirations. Their situation highlighted the predominance of local and state level administration, habitually privileged over federal action. The brutality and backlash against black veterans did facilitate a more insistent movement for change, and reformers adapted their techniques and used the new political, military, and international environments as leverage.

Behind the turmoil lay the tacit understanding that military service merited a certain type of treatment and the rights of citizenship. African Americans understood this and pointed to the poor treatment of their veterans to underscore the hypocrisy of American democracy. They emphasized the conflict between a segregated military fighting for democracy, and of a society that rejected the martial and other sacrifices of an entire segment of its population. Many white

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<sup>129</sup> Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 44-49.

Americans understood this as well. Their fears of African-American demands for civil liberties and militant black veterans led them to limit the extent to which black veterans could participate in re-assimilation programs, regulating the image of the returning hero and veteran. At times these fears also led whites to strike out violently at any perceived boundary crossing. As they returned, black veterans faced this angry white backlash and struggled to obtain the benefits due to veterans. Yet they did not sit idly by as white civilians attempted to strip them of these rights. Nor were the older generation of black activists the only group resisting white supremacy and racism in the postwar period. As black veterans arrived home and settled back into civilian society, they too began insisting upon respect and equal opportunity. With a coalition of black veterans and older reformers, new types of activism emerged, vaulting the country into an emerging civil rights movement by 1954.

## Chapter 5

### The Descent to Hell: African American Veterans Transgress Boundaries and Unwritten Laws, 1946-1953

This globular war is certainly a big classroom, many of the teachings are a little rough. The yesterday's tune will not do. New times will automatically demand new techniques, with more real life—the practical things taught. Of course this will lessen the syntax and we will demand more citizenship with the infusion of more humanity.<sup>1</sup>

Frederic Clanagan to Mr. Nabrit

Toward the end of the war Frederick Clanagan wrote to his alma mater, Howard University, foreshadowing an impending struggle. After their time abroad and new experiences, African-American servicemen returned home conscious that the status quo had to change. They returned home with substantial plans, eager for additional education and improved financial situations. In his letter, Clanagan articulated the thoughts of many black soldiers. They went abroad, saw the world, encountered other cultures, and served their country in a capacity that they felt entitled them to greater citizenship back home. If the teachings were “a little rough,” they left veterans better prepared to deal with the verbal, physical, mental, and economic attacks that America had in store. Returning black veterans did not stand idly by while the older generation of activists co-opted their image to push for change. Rather, the young men used their experiences and new consciousness to make the demands that Clanagan foretold. This chapter will analyze the ways that individual black veterans responded to the indignities they

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<sup>1</sup> Letter Frederic Clanagan to Mr. Nabrit, 13 January 1945, Collection of Letters from Howard University Men and Women in the Armed Forces, 1941-1946, Collection 122-1 to 122-3, box A-I 122-1, folder: Clanagan, Frederic F.—1944 (typescript); Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

faced upon their return. It examines the extent to which black veterans took advantage of the benefits they were supposed to receive as veterans, and the broader patterns of change this initiated.

Historians debate the extent to which the Second World War, and specifically the G.I. Bill, affected African American socioeconomic status. Many have cited the Second World War as a moment that initiated tremendous changes in race relations, a “prelude to revolution.”<sup>2</sup> Yet few have actually tried to demonstrate the war’s impact as a stimulus for change. More historians, like Thomas Sugrue and Daniel Kryder, have problematized this assumption and argued that the war limited African Americans’ ability to advance socially and economically for the remainder of the twentieth century. Sugrue articulated the ways that migration and wartime industry in Detroit led to residential segregation and eventual urban crisis in the city for African Americans. Kryder argued that while war can provide new economic and political opportunities for minorities and women by setting authorities off-balance and undermining social norms, it could also heighten economic and social regulation. In *When Affirmative Action Was White*, Ira Katznelson looked at the New Deal and the G.I. Bill as instances of white affirmative action that served to widen the racial divide and create a greater wealth disparity.<sup>3</sup> The limitations of African-American advancement in the postwar period are crucial to understanding race relations throughout the remainder of the century and social and racial inequalities today.

But African Americans also pushed boundaries and produced, or attempted to produce, change during this period. As historians remind us and as the last chapter demonstrates, black

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<sup>2</sup> Bernard Sternsher, *The Negro in Depression and War: Prelude to Revolution, 1930-1945* (Chicago, IL: Quadrangle Books, 1969).

<sup>3</sup> Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996, 2005); Daniel Kryder, *Divided Arsenal: Race and the American State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005).

troops returned home to face great obstacles, including official discrimination and outright violence, which blocked progress everywhere. Veterans struggled to re-assimilate into U.S. society while government organizations in place to aid this transition overlooked and ignored their particular needs, heightening discrimination at the local level and denying certain benefits. In many instances, this neglect left African-American veterans without access to the same remunerations as white veterans, who were able to take housing loans or attend reputable vocational schools. Certain professions remained closed to black veterans as well, leaving highly educated black men working in semi-skilled jobs. Many veterans refused to return to unskilled labor following the war, and the large scale migrations demonstrated how they exercised mobility and left the South or in some cases the U.S. altogether.

At the same time, the G.I. Bill opened up some opportunities for education. After their experiences in the military and overseas, black veterans reentered society with a new determination. More African Americans than ever before enrolled in schools for higher and vocational education. Veterans also initiated a string of lawsuits against colleges and universities that only admitted white students, demanding the right to education and the G.I. Bill benefits. Meanwhile, the integration of the military, while proceeding slowly, began opening new opportunities in the postwar period. Additional education for black veterans led to increased opportunity in the workforce and expanded the black professional class. Black veterans spearheaded efforts toward desegregating graduate and professional educational programs. When they reentered the workplace, they insisted upon a modicum of respect. Many felt that after serving and fighting overseas, accepting the same mistreatment and disrespect was unacceptable.

Individual black veterans challenged the system in a variety of ways. While opportunity remained limited, black veterans resisted oppression in any way possible. In “‘We Are Not What We Seem’: Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South,” historian Robin D.G. Kelley articulated a theory of infrapolitics and the ways that daily acts of resistance, unorganized or evasive actions by subordinate groups have cumulative effects on power relations, a kind of political action. He pointed out that the hundreds of everyday acts of resistance in public spaces appear to amount to little because of the isolation of the incidents and the limited success each individual produced. Yet these acts left a collective memory for both African Americans and whites, and at times even sparked larger acts of collective resistance.<sup>4</sup> Nineteenth-century sociologist Maurice Halbwachs developed the concept of collective memory, arguing that memory most often functions in a collective framework. People most often appeal to memory in their direct and indirect relations with others. It is within society that humans recall, recognize, and localize memories. We reconstruct our understandings of the past in accord with the predominant thoughts and understandings of the present. Each time an individual reconstructs memories, it is under the pressures of society, which can cause the mind to transfigure the past.<sup>5</sup> In the context of this society, whether African Americans won or lost these small individual battles, these forms of opposition and daily acts of resistance elicited responses from powerful sections of society and reshaped perceptions and memories of society. In turn, these things shaped the nature of the struggle. Even if black opposition appeared

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<sup>4</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley, “‘We Are Not What We Seem’: Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South,” *Journal of American History* 80, no. 1 (1993), 75-78.

<sup>5</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. and ed. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 40, 51, 168.

invisible or ignored or censored by the press, it still influenced political and legal structures significantly.<sup>6</sup>

W.E.B. Du Bois maintained that black and white relations in the South consisted of a thousand little actions in everyday life. In any community or society, these were “most elusive to the grasp and yet most essential to any clear conception of the group life taken as a whole.”<sup>7</sup> The true nature of race relations might not be immediately apparent to someone unfamiliar with the social norms; it was easy to miss the subtle yet intricate social interactions. Upon observation, however, explained Du Bois, the “shadows of the color-line” emerged, and it became apparent that the races had little to no intellectual commerce or points where their thoughts and feeling directly interacted. They attended separate churches, separate schools, and public gatherings; they read different papers and books. If any attempted to cross these social boundaries or misstepped in this carefully staged social scene, both the law and public opinion descended upon the transgressors. The colorline “bound and barred” both blacks and whites. Any attempts at friendliness, philanthropy, or fellowship between the two races failed because of the “tremendous force of unwritten law against the innovators.”<sup>8</sup>

This chapter examines the ways that black veterans crossed fixed social boundaries, moving across the colorline and bucking subtle rules for social interactions. Their individual acts of resistance, conscious and unconscious, blatant and concealed, at times elicited responses from larger structures and organizations. I consider the ways that black veterans acted outside of the scope of acceptable social behavior, challenging what Kelley refers to as interracial etiquette.

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<sup>6</sup> Kelley, “We Are Not What We Seem,” 108-110.

<sup>7</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* in *W.E.B. Du Bois: Writings* (New York, NY: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 1986), 487.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 488-489.

When veterans arrived home, they fought to obtain G.I. Bill benefits, insisting upon better education and employment than before the war. They challenged fixed notions about the racial hierarchy as they attempted to climb the professional and social ladders. Their actions contributed to increased violent backlash from white civilians, and the collision between the black and white communities demonstrated the presence of new social dynamics, confirming that black veterans had crossed boundaries and shifted the understanding of acceptable social behavior. African-American veterans did not passively acquiesce to the proliferation of interracial violence. On the contrary, they consistently challenged white male supremacy and fought back in a series of physical and even armed confrontations. They asserted their claims to masculinity and their political rights in the postwar period, refusing to be intimidated. When African-American veterans lashed back with violence at times, as they struggled to obtain education in the postwar period, and in their overt attempts to be political and exercise the right to vote, they reacted to the environment on the homefront. Just as black activists employed that military service to push for overarching political, social, and institutional changes, the black veterans used their new consciousness to defend their own rights. As Du Bois noted, the transgressors experienced swift and often violent retaliation, not always just from the white community. With their actions, black veterans began shaping a new collective cultural identity in the postwar period.

Even during the war, African-American troops hungered to obtain more education back in the United States. Frederic Clanagan noted in 1944 that education would shape the next generation, and others echoed his sentiments. One lieutenant in the South Pacific wrote that men often dwelt on their postwar plans. “Personally,” he explained, “I am anxious to secure a job as a junior accountant . . . . I feel certain that additional formal education will enable me to meet

the keen competition after the war.”<sup>9</sup> Another soldier, at Fort Huachuca, watched the progress of the veterans’ education programs with some interest and planned to “take advantage of it when I return.”<sup>10</sup> Rollin Williams wrote the “folks” back at Howard that he had been purchasing a bond a month so that upon his return he would be financially able to further his education.<sup>11</sup> As African-American veterans returned to civilian life, they hastened to obtain further education to better prepare them for the future.

The veterans used the G.I. Bill for various types of education. As historians point out, however, the long term effects of the G.I. Bill are debatable. Historian David H. Onkst argued that the war had limited socioeconomic impact on the majority of black veterans who returned and settled in the Deep South. As he revealed, of all the benefits within the G.I. Bill, black veterans were best able to take advantage of the educational benefits, though to a limited extent. Vocational education programs met with limited success because of local administrators. Within higher education, African Americans competed for limited numbers of slots in historically black colleges and universities. As the war drew to a close, black colleges and universities underestimated the numbers of black veterans intending to enter or return to college.<sup>12</sup> In 1946 record numbers of Americans enrolled. Colleges and universities across America had to expand

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<sup>9</sup> Letter, Lt. Edgar (E.G) Davis to Mr. Nabrit, 20 May 1944, Collection of Letters from Howard University Men and Women in the Armed Forces, 1941-1946, box A-I 122-1, folder: Davis, E.G.—1944 (holograph); Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>10</sup> Letter, J.E. Raynor, Jr. to Dr. Mordecai W. Johnson, 1944, Collection of Letters from Howard University Men and Women in the Armed Forces, 1941-1946, box A-I 122-1, folder Raynor, J.E., Jr.—1944 (typescript); Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>11</sup> Letter, Rollin Williams to “folks” (received by President’s office, Howard University), 5 June 1944, Collection of Letters from Howard University Men and Women in the Armed Forces, 1941-1946, box A-I 122-1, folder: Williams, Rollin C.—1943-1944 (holographs) 161; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>12</sup> David H. Onkst, ““First a Negro . . . Incidentally a Veteran”: Black World War Two Veterans and the G.I. Bill of Rights in the Deep South, 1944-1948,” *The Journal of Social History*, 31, no. 3 (1998), 529-531.

facilities to meet the extraordinary influx of students. That fall, college enrollment was up at least fifteen percent from the peak pre-Pearl Harbor. Students faced housing problems, and shortages of classroom space and teachers.<sup>13</sup> Black colleges boasted record enrollment in 1946 as well. Fisk, Howard, and Hampton Universities all recorded unprecedented enrollments, and veterans made up a significant percentage of the population.<sup>14</sup> African-American institutions could only accommodate so much of the surge. Many other institutions, particularly in the South, did not permit black students to enroll. With limited resources, they turned away between 15 and 20 thousand veterans in 1947.<sup>15</sup>

For some veterans, historically black colleges and universities provided the most logical choice for continuing education. Sailor Leon Frasier described the G.I. Bill as his savior. He graduated from Fisk in 1948 and went on to Howard for medical school, where the G.I. Bill carried him almost completely through.<sup>16</sup> When Louis Perkins left the Navy, a friend suggested he consider Prairie View University when he could not find work in Texas. Perkins finished with a degree in chemistry and went on to teach high school.<sup>17</sup> Damon J. Keith graduated from Howard Law School in 1949. But in a segregated D.C., Howard students still could not attend theaters and restaurants. Corporate or federal law firms were also unlikely to hire black

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<sup>13</sup> Benjamin Fine, "Colleges Expect Peak Enrollment," *New York Times (1923-Current File)*; Feb 24, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2009), p. 12.

<sup>14</sup> "Negro Colleges Open Peak Year," in *The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967)*; Sep 28, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975), p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> Onkst, "'First a Negro,'" 529-531.

<sup>16</sup> Leon Fraser, *Me, World War II, Segregation and Other Stuff*, a manuscript by Leon Fraser, 20 May 2003, folder 1 Fraser, Leon Allison Memoir (MSO), Box #312; Leon Allison Fraser, M.D. Collection (AFC/2001/001/5184) Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. Washington, D.C.

<sup>17</sup> Louis Perkins, interview by Richard Miller, Afro-American historical and Genealogical Society (AAHGS), not dated, Louis Raymond Perkins Collection (AFC/2001/001/21540), Veterans History Collection, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. Washington, D.C.

graduates, and the D.C. Bar Association did not welcome black lawyers. Black law students had few options. As Keith noted, for any who grew tired of the “tremendous and at times unbearable pressures that . . . [the administrators] were putting on us in this law school, the color of our skin precluded a transfer to most of the city’s other schools.”<sup>18</sup>

With the limited number of spots available at historically black colleges, many black veterans had to carve out their own niche at white institutions. Lieutenant Robert Madison of the 370<sup>th</sup> left the military in June 1946 and returned home to Cleveland, Ohio. Prior to the war, Madison had studied architecture at Howard and he continued his studies in Italy. He decided not to return to Howard, however, and to use the G.I. Bill to finish his studies at Case Western Reserve University. The dean of the architecture program explained to Madison that Case Western had never graduated a black student and probably never would. Black architects were unlikely to find work, continued the dean, so black students would only take up valuable space at the school. “I went back home and got angry,” fumed Madison. “I got angry, I put on my military uniform. I put my bars on my shoulder, my battle ribbons on my chest and my purple heart, and I went back up to the school and asked to speak to the dean of admissions, not the dean of architecture. I said look: I spent the past two years of my life fighting to make this world free for democracy. My blood is over there on the soil of Italy. . . . so don’t tell me I can’t get into the school of architecture.” The dean acknowledged that Madison had a good point. After administering a series of tests, Case Western permitted Madison to enroll and resume his studies.

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<sup>18</sup> Judge Damon J. Keith, “Reflections After Thirty-Two Years,” Judge William Henry Hastie Lecture, 1981, *Howard Law Journal* 25:2, 1982, folder 7 Article—Judge Wm Henry Hastie Lecture, 1981; Damon J. Keith Papers, Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

When Madison showed up to Case Western in 1946 wearing full officers' dress, he intentionally challenged notions of masculinity and citizenship. The image of a black man in uniform worried many white Americans and had already prompted a wave of violence against black veterans such as Isaac Woodard. Wearing the uniform with decorations and battle ribbons, Madison laid claim to a martial masculinity through his service and battle experience. Military service also implied access to first-class citizenship, and Madison insisted upon this as well in his demands for equal educational opportunity. Madison's act of transgression produced results and he attended the university of his choice without taking legal action. Others, especially in the South, provoked backlash for perhaps unintentional or unavoidable acts of transgression.

Yet acceptance to white institutions did not signify the end of their struggles. Once enrolled, black veterans continued to experience discrimination and maltreatment. For those who finished, they found a limited job market and many could not find work in their chosen professions. Their efforts and insistence on the educational benefits, and perseverance in the face of enormous setbacks and racism set important precedents in desegregation of the educational system. Case Western Reserve University attempted to segregate Madison at every turn. In the summer of 1947 the senior architecture class sponsored a picnic. Madison received his invitation, paid his dues, and attended. He recalled beautiful grounds at the country club, only the organizers had neglected to inform the club of his attendance. Management immediately pulled him aside and asked him to leave; they did not permit "colored" people to use the dining room. "I said so what," he bristled, "I paid my dues, I'm not gonna leave."<sup>19</sup> As a former Howard classmate remarked when Madison had commandeered an estate in Italy to

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<sup>19</sup> Robert Madison, interview by Jerri Donohue, not dated, Robert Madison Collection (AFC/2001/001/48858) Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

house his motor pool, “he stayed.”<sup>20</sup> Some of his white classmates supported his resolution and refused to eat if the club declined to serve him. Madison generated a sensation among the black wait staff when he entered the dining room that afternoon. He had long suspected that the architecture dean disliked his presence at Western Reserve. This man had refused his original entry into the program. It seemed after the picnic, the dean resolved to rid the school of the troublesome veteran. The school picked certain courses for Madison, pushed him through at an accelerated rate, and graduated him in 1948 without all the required courses. Later, when Madison applied for graduate work at Harvard, the university pointed out he did not qualify for a degree from Case Western. A faculty member gave him a chance anyway, and admitted Madison to the Harvard School of Design with his financial support from the G.I. Bill.<sup>21</sup>

Trends in graduate and professional education mirrored this progression. The push for greater access to graduate education picked up in the 1930s with a few landmark court battles. In 1933 African American Thomas Hocutt filed a suit against the University of North Carolina (UNC) in *Hocutt v. North Carolina*. A student at North Carolina College (later NC Central University), Hocutt wanted to attend a pharmacy program and UNC possessed the only one in the state. Hocutt lost the suit on a technicality. North Carolina College president, African American James Edward Shepard, refused to forward Hocutt’s transcript when he learned of the case. The North Carolina judge subsequently ruled that Hocutt had not fully complied with the university’s admissions requirements. The judge warned, however, that North Carolina had to create more substantially equal facilities in order to sustain segregation. Other cases soon

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<sup>20</sup> Letter, J. Dickerson to Dean Downing, Howard University, not dated, Collection of Letters from Howard University Men and Women in the Armed Forces, 1941-1946, box A-I 122-1, folder: Dickerson, J.—1945 (photostat); Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Madison, interview by Jerri Donohue, not dated, Robert Madison Collection (AFC/2001/001/48858) Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

followed. In 1936 a court of appeals in Annapolis, Maryland ruled that the University of Maryland Law School must admit an African American applicant because it was the only publically supported law school in Maryland. States in the South largely ignored the ruling in *Murray v. University of Maryland Law School*. Lloyd Lionel Gaines attempted the same feat at the University of Missouri Law School.<sup>22</sup> *Gaines v. Canada* went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. Charles Hamilton Houston, the NAACP lawyer heading the case in Missouri, insisted that the courts uphold the “separate but equal” ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Most segregated states did not provide any graduate schools for African Americans, making graduate education an ideal platform for the battle. The Supreme Court ruled that Missouri either had to build an equal law school for blacks, or admit him to the University of Missouri. Missouri chose the former, and founded Lincoln University School of Law for African Americans. These cases, especially *Gaines v. Canada*, set a precedent for legal battles in the 1940s and 1950s over equal access to graduate education.

In 1948 the first African Americans began at the University of Arkansas Law School, veterans Silas Hunt and Wiley A. Branton. Hunt had served in Europe and Branton in the Pacific. Arkansas made the decision of its own volition after witnessing the problems schools like the University of Oklahoma experienced with a case filed by Ms. Ada Lois Sipuel in *Sipuel v. Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma*. Branton later wrote that while he was proud that Arkansas voluntarily admitted the first black students without a lawsuit, the University did not actually begin to provide them with equal facilities until the decisions in *McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents* and *Sweatt v. Painter* in 1950. Branton entered law school married

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<sup>22</sup> Augustus M. Burns III, “Graduate Education for Blacks in North Carolina, 1930-1951,” in *The Journal of Southern History* 46, no. 2 (1980), 196-203. At times the actions of university presidents such as James Edward Shepard demonstrate diverse ideas within the black community about how to combat discrimination and racism. The older generation especially did not always advocate integration.

with three children, but the university refused him campus housing or other housing under the auspices of the school, including the special veteran's housing despite his time in the Pacific. In order to live with his family, Branton had to purchase a lot and build a house in Fayetteville.<sup>23</sup>

Graduate schools had begun to integrate. When the Supreme Court reaffirmed the *Gaines* decision in *Sipuel v. Board of Regents of University of Oklahoma*, other schools began following suit, as in Arkansas. Border States responded first, and in January 1948 Delaware declared it would integrate schools. Shortly after Hunt and Branton started at Arkansas, the school admitted a black female medical student. Another African-American veteran filed suit against the Maryland Institute of Fine Arts in 1947.<sup>24</sup> Major Wilmore B. Leonard, 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group veteran, attempted to enroll at the University of Maryland that same year. The University sent Leonard matriculation material stating he met the requirements for graduate study in Chemistry. When they discovered his race, the University asked for the material back, saying it had been sent by mistake. The school claimed that they rejected him after “provisionally accepting him” because of a marginal scholastic record. Wilmore unequivocally refused to withdraw his application and declared his intention to “be there on registration day.” That same semester, Johns Hopkins opened its doors to black students.<sup>25</sup> In November 1948, the University of Maryland graduate school declared it would begin admitting qualified African

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<sup>23</sup> Wiley Branton, “The History and Future of School Desegregation,” Wiley A. Branton Papers, Collection 187-1 to 187-18, box Wiley A. Branton Papers Correspondence Writings by Branton, 187-10, folder: 30, Writings by Branton—“The History and Future of School Desegregation,” Remarks prepared for delivery before the Eighth Circuit Judicial Conf. Little Rock AR 7/25/1985; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University. Branton graduated from Arkansas in 1952. Hunt died in 1949 from tuberculosis, a possible complication from his war injuries.

<sup>24</sup> “Barred Negro Sues School in Baltimore,” *The New York Times (1923-Current File)*; Mar 9, 1947. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2009), p. 53.

<sup>25</sup> “Negro Seeks Graduate Study at Maryland,” *The Washington Post (1923-1954)*; Aug 14, 1947. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Washington Post (1877-1996), p. B2. And “U. of Md. Rejects ‘Admitted’ Vet,” *Afro-American (1893-1988)*; Sep 20, 1947; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Baltimore Afro-American (1893-1988), p. 1.

Americans.<sup>26</sup> Although Maryland theoretically opened its doors in 1948, it required another lawsuit in 1950 to officially admit black students. Ninety-Second Infantry Division veteran, Parren J. Mitchell and NAACP counsel Thurgood Marshall filed suit for discriminatory admissions policies. Maryland admitted Mitchell to its Baltimore campus, and asked that the NAACP drop the suit. Two years later Mitchell graduated with an M.A. in sociology and returned to Morgan State University to teach.<sup>27</sup>

Southern schools generally took longer to integrate. After a 258 year ban on black students, William and Mary opened its graduate school to Hulon L. Willis, a Norfolk public school teacher and veteran. Another veteran forced Alabama to begin considering the question in 1948 when he attempted to enroll at Alabama Polytechnic Institute to study architecture.<sup>28</sup> In New Orleans, Louisiana State University informed a veteran that Louisiana maintained separate schools, and using the precedent set in *Gaines*, recommended he attend Southern University Law School.<sup>29</sup> Medgar Evers filed the first lawsuit against the University of Mississippi Law School in 1954. The state of Mississippi offered to send him to another out-of-state law school, and when he refused Mississippi began requiring each student applying to state institutions to

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<sup>26</sup> Burns, "Graduate Education for Blacks in North Carolina," 210.

<sup>27</sup> "Freedom Fund Dinner Program," 1983, NAACP Freedom Fund Dinner, folder 1 NAACP Freedom Fund Dinner 1983, box 5; Damon J. Keith Papers, Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI; "Negro Admitted to Baltimore Unit of Maryland U.," *The Washington Post* (1923-1954); Aug 31, 1950. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Washington Post (1877-1996), p. 1.

<sup>28</sup> "Veteran Forces Alabama to Take Stand on University Education," *The Chicago Defender (National edition)* (1921-1967); Feb 28, 1948. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975), p. 1.

<sup>29</sup> "Veteran Barred by Law School in Louisiana," *The Chicago Defender (National edition)* (1921-1967); Mar 2, 1946; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975), p. 1.

provide recommendations from five alumni.<sup>30</sup> The university did not begin admitting black law students until James Meredith in 1962.

In North Carolina, a group composed partially of veterans picked up a lawsuit against the University of North Carolina's law school. After *Gaines v. Canada* in 1938, North Carolina opted to maintain separate educational facilities rather than admit African Americans at UNC. The state authorized North Carolina College (NCC) and North Carolina A&T, providing graduate programs in liberal arts perspectives and agriculture and technology respectively. North Carolina College received state tuition grants to administer its programs, and the state provided exorbitant amounts of money to keep African Americans out of the UNC school system. In spite of the enormous costs, North Carolina College still lacked books, equipment, and space. The college housed the law school in two rooms of the college administration building, and students protested that the facility was inherently unequal.<sup>31</sup> One student recalled that the college designated it the Law Department. Furthermore, the American Bar Association had not accredited the law school. When veteran Floyd McKissick and others entered the program immediately after the war, they made it their first priority to gain accreditation. They began by picketing the legislature, and the state spent additional money to bring the school up to accreditation standards. The NCC students also sought cooperation with the NAACP to bring a suit against the University of North Carolina.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Memo, Roy Wilkins to Glouster B. Current, 13 Dec 1954. In ed. Myrlie Evers-Williams and Manning Marable, *The Autobiography of Medgar Evers: A Hero's Life and Legacy Revealed Through His Writings, Letters, and Speeches* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2005), 21.

<sup>31</sup> Burns, "Graduate Education for Blacks in North Carolina," 205, 209.

<sup>32</sup> Floyd B. McKissick Sr., Interview by Bruce Kalk, May 31, 1989. Southern Oral History Program Collection (34007). Southern Oral History Program, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. <[http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/html\\_use/L-0040.html](http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/html_use/L-0040.html)>

In 1949, two students at NCC, Harold Epps and Robert Glass, initiated the first desegregation lawsuit against the University of North Carolina. Eventually, Epps and Glass finished school, and four other students at NCC recommenced the suit under the auspices of the NAACP. This new group of plaintiffs included two veterans, Floyd McKissick and J. Kenneth Lee. The major plaintiff in the case, Floyd McKissick had served in the Army, finished college at Morehouse in Atlanta, then proceeded immediately to law school. “After we got out of the Army, we were determined there was not going to be any more segregation in North Carolina,” vowed McKissick. “And I think most of the fellows who had been in World War II had been around the world and they had seen things, and they knew that they were not what America had depicted them to be. They had seen the whole world, and they were not going to live in a pattern of segregation as they had in the past.” In the case of law school, McKissick explained, “It was generally felt . . . that people were going to be fair and treat you right. You were a returning veteran. And some schools were letting blacks in that never had before.” Black veterans returned with the feeling that in North Carolina, the state would admit black veterans to these programs “without being forced to do it.” The veterans soon discovered that North Carolina had no intention of integrating. The University of North Carolina never even responded to McKissick’s first letter of application to its law school.<sup>33</sup> Other black veterans attempted to enter the UNC as well with the same result.<sup>34</sup>

The case of *Epps v. Carmichael* convened before Judge Johnson Jay Hayes in Greensboro in August 1950. “I had a lot of respect for Judge Hayes, and I did until he died. But

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<sup>33</sup> Floyd B. McKissick Sr., Interview by Bruce Kalk, May 31, 1989. Southern Oral History Program Collection (34007). Southern Oral History Program, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. <[http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/html\\_use/L-0040.html](http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/html_use/L-0040.html)>

<sup>34</sup> “Kentucky Bars Negro: New Trial Date Set for Oklahoma Case; N. Carolina on Spot,” in *The Pittsburgh Courier* (1911-1950); Apr 3, 1948. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Pittsburgh Courier (1911-2002), p. 1.

when he ruled against us I will never forget,” recalled Navy veteran J. Kenneth Lee. Judge Hayes explained that legally he believed the plaintiffs’ contentions were correct. Lee remembered the judge explained, “But I tell you what, I was born in North Wilkesboro and I was raised here in the South, and if somebody rules that you can go to the University of North Carolina, it’s going to be somebody other than me.”<sup>35</sup> Hayes ruled that the University of North Carolina and NC College Law Schools were substantially equivalent. Overcrowding and large classes at UNC offset any disadvantages at North Carolina College. Hayes pointed out that NCC Law School also appeared to be thriving, and proportionally more NCC graduates passed the state bar exam than UNC graduates. These factors made the *Epps* case different than *Gaines* and *Sweatt v. Painter*.<sup>36</sup> With the NAACP’s Thurgood Marshall arguing the case, NCC plaintiffs appealed the decision. In *McKissick v. Carmichael* in March of 1951, a U.S. Court of Appeals reversed the decision in *Epps*. Meanwhile at UNC, a group of trustees assembled to discuss the schools’ policy. They recommended that the school should process applications regardless of color in fields of study not available elsewhere in the state.<sup>37</sup> The circuit court reversed the district’s findings, and remanded the case to the lower court to issue an injunction prohibiting the University from denying applicants based on race, ordering that UNC admit the plaintiffs.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> J. Kenneth Lee, Interview by Eugene Pfaff, circa 1980. GreensboroVOICES Collection, Item # 1.10.540. The University of North Carolina at Greensboro. < <http://library.uncg.edu/dp/crg/oralHistItem.aspx?i=540>>.

<sup>36</sup> Burns, “Graduate Education for Blacks in North Carolina,” 205, 209, 215; Charles E. Day, “The Evolution of the Modern Law School: Crucial Trends that Bridge Past and Future,” in *73 NC Law Review* 675(1995), 4. *Sweatt v. Painter* occurred in June 1950 when Heman Marion Sweatt attempted to enter the University of Texas Law School. The U.S. Supreme Court found that the legal education at the makeshift state school Texas provided to African American was not “substantially equal” to what he would receive at the University of Texas. The courts ordered his admission to University of Texas, setting a precedent for McKissick’s lawsuit. Many historical accounts incorrectly refer to Heman Sweatt as a veteran. This may be because the black press consistently said the same, which demonstrates how the media used the image and service of black veterans as a tool to press for equal rights.

<sup>37</sup> Burns, “Graduate Education for Blacks in North Carolina,” 216.

<sup>38</sup> Day, “The Evolution of the Modern Law School,” 5.

In the summer of 1951, the first African-American students began law school at the University of North Carolina. McKissick, having already received his LL.B. at NCC, only stayed for the summer session. The black law students lived in the Law School dormitory, Steele Hall. “This was . . . right after the war, and there were students standing on each other’s heads to get in there,” remembered J. Kenneth Lee. “They gave us the entire third floor . . . and nobody was up there but us.”<sup>39</sup> White students played pranks constantly, and many black students felt uncomfortable staying on campus at night. McKissick stayed on campus, and he often found dead black snakes in desk or bureau drawers. Students sometimes put water on his clothes, or buckets of water on the doors. “They had a lot of fun with you,” McKissick remarked sardonically, “Or they thought they were having fun. You’d get a letter every day from the Ku Klux Klan telling you that you’re at the wrong place. . . . You had a lot of threats.” After hearing that the pool did not permit African Americans, McKissick “went on and jumped in the pool. After I jumped into the pool, I walked on out and nobody said anything to me . . . . I said, ‘It’s integrated now.’ And that was it.”<sup>40</sup>

The university provided students with tickets to sporting events, seating them in the student section. Black professional students had to sit in the “colored section” behind the goalposts. When the law students realized this, they wrote to the governor and went back to their lawyers. The courts finally ordered the school to provide tickets in the student section. University chancellor Robert House handed the law students the tickets personally, saying, “Now I’m giving you these tickets, but I hope you got sense enough not to use them.” House explained

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<sup>39</sup> J. Kenneth Lee, Interview by Eugene Pfaff, circa 1980. GreensboroVOICES Collection, Item # 1.10.540. The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

<sup>40</sup> Floyd B. McKissick Sr., interview by Bruce Kalk, May 31, 1989, Southern Oral History Program Collection (34007), Southern Oral History Program, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

that athletic events accommodated people and alumnae from all over the state.<sup>41</sup> Many North Carolinians had never seen black and white people sit together before in social situations, “the university could therefore not be responsible if somebody hit us in the head with a rock or if there was a riot or that sort of thing,” explained Lee.<sup>42</sup> House hoped the law students just wanted a moral victory, Lee continued; “I think if he hadn’t have said that, we might not have gone. But we felt we had to go after that.” The law students attended the first game with an escort. By that time, the black students had gained the support of a number of sympathetic white students. The college newspaper, the *Daily Tar Heel*, also continuously criticized the school administration for refusing to treat the African-American graduate and professional students like everyone else. Each step of the way the black students fought for equality at the University of North Carolina. You “never knew what to expect,” expressed Lee. “They [the board of trustees and the chancellor] . . . wouldn’t give us [anything]—wouldn’t let us in the swimming pools. Had to go back to court for that.”<sup>43</sup>

Significant numbers of veterans did not gain access to the benefits that the G.I. Bill guaranteed. Even in education, many veterans found they could not take advantage of their benefits because of segregation and overcrowding. Yet following the war, colleges and universities began the process of integration. A slew of lawsuits throughout the country, often initiated by veterans, prompted this new development. The influx of school desegregation cases set important legal precedents. Veterans both heralded and built upon the legal precedents established in *Sweatt*, and graduate school integration mushroomed throughout the South. In

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<sup>41</sup> J. Kenneth Lee, interview by Kathleen Hoke, June 6, 1990. GreensboroVOICES Collection, Item # 1.10.541. The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

<sup>42</sup> J. Kenneth Lee, interview by Eugene Pfaff, circa 1980. GreensboroVOICES Collection, Item # 1.10.540. The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

<sup>43</sup> J. Kenneth Lee, interview by Kathleen Hoke, June 6, 1990. GreensboroVOICES Collection, Item # 1.10.541. The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

response to these lawsuits, institutions like the University of Arkansas or Western Reserve opened their doors. They did so grudgingly, in limited numbers, and making life as hard as possible for black students. In 1951 McKissick and Lee began law school at UNC, and another black veteran began medical school at Carolina. Only years later, in 1955, did Carolina begin admitting black undergraduate students as well.

The limited numbers of veterans who insisted upon taking advantage of educational benefits opened a floodgate for the larger African-American community. As McKissick pointed out, they had seen the world, they knew that they were capable and intelligent, and they refused to return to segregation. In the G.I. Bill, veterans potentially had the financial means to support their ambitions. Veterans now constituted a substantial portion of the university population. At Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, five hundred and thirty-four veterans enrolled in a student body of seven hundred and ninety-one. Maryland schools boasted similar statistics for veterans.<sup>44</sup> In early 1946, over a million veterans had applied to take advantage of the G.I. Bill's educational benefits.<sup>45</sup> To the extent that they could, black veterans took advantage of these benefits as well, and the large enrollment numbers, especially at black institutions, illustrated their efforts. They did not lead every effort to integrate, but with their newfound resources and the overwhelming percentages of veterans entering schools, they led a substantial number. The black press lent credence to their educational struggles, highlighting their veteran status and using it to push for inclusion in a first-class citizenship. Despite the many limitations of the G.I. Bill's educational benefits for black veterans, their use of these benefits began breaking down

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<sup>44</sup> "War-Veteran School Influx is Felt Here," *The Sun (1837-1987)*; Feb 13, 1946; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1987) p. 22.

<sup>45</sup> Benjamin Fine, "College Expect Peak Enrollments," *New York Times (1923-Current File)*; Feb 24, 1946; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2009), p. 12.

segregation in American universities, forcing white colleges to admit larger numbers of African Americans, leading to more diverse curriculums for black students, and eventually helping to expand the black middle class.<sup>46</sup>

Once they enrolled in the schools, administrators often made their lives difficult. The veterans persevered, at times taking legal actions to address educational inequalities and blatantly discriminatory practices. Without McKissick and Lee's battles with the UNC administration, the institution might have continued with its segregationist practices. Their insistence upon equal treatment at these schools had important repercussions. When Lee and McKissick appealed to the courts to address the social inequalities for black UNC students, or when Madison refused to eat separately from his cohort, each transgressed social boundaries and their actions reverberated. These actions may not have affected the attitudes and entrenched racism of the administrations or the older generations. Yet each of the veterans also spoke of friendships and support from white students at the institutions. McKissick remembered that a number of white students supported and tried to befriend the black law students. Other, less amenable whites plagued these students constantly, calling them, "nigger lovers."<sup>47</sup> While interracial mingling remained an egregious social wrong for many, especially the older generation, some subtle social shifts had already begun, shaping a new collective memory for both whites and blacks. As Chancellor House told Lee, in order to dissuade the young men from attending Carolina sporting events, people coming to the games had never seen black and white people sitting together. In trying to make another point entirely, House hit upon an important

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<sup>46</sup> Hilary Herbold, "Never a Level Playing Field: Blacks and the G.I. Bill," *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 6 (1994-1995), 108.

<sup>47</sup> Floyd B. McKissick Sr., Interview by Bruce Kalk, May 31, 1989. Southern Oral History Program Collection (34007). Southern Oral History Program, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

idea: these experiences and actions would serve to undermine the existing racial order and introduce the next generation to a new understanding of normative race relations.

In addition, these cases affected larger structures. Not only did many lead to the beginning of integration for graduate integration, but they prompted involvement from structures and organizations. Organizations like the NAACP and the Southern Regional Council worked on these cases and to integrate the educational system because of individual veterans' initial refusal to be relegated to second rate institutions. States also spent excessive amounts of money to maintain the system of segregation. At the end of World War II, North Carolina College received the fourth largest operating expense budget appropriation in the state, just behind the three branches of the Consolidated University system.<sup>48</sup> When Heman Sweatt applied for admission to the University of Texas Law School in 1946, the state rushed to establish a separate but equal law school in the form of Texas State University for Negroes (TSUN), with an appropriation of \$2.75 million.<sup>49</sup> The school opened in 1947 with an enrollment of two—"but neither was Heman Marion Sweatt," reported the *Pittsburgh Courier*.<sup>50</sup> Sweatt took his case to the Supreme Court, eventually establishing the precedent in *Sweatt v. Painter*. Prior to these influential cases, states like North Carolina, Louisiana, and Texas actually established scholarship programs to send African American applicants to graduate institutions out-of-state. Maryland offered to send Parren J. Mitchell to an out-of-state graduate institution as well.<sup>51</sup> The

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<sup>48</sup> Burns , "Graduate Education for Blacks in North Carolina," 206.

<sup>49</sup> Dwonna Goldstone, "Heman Sweatt and the Racial Integration of the University of Texas," *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 54, (2006/2007), 54; Ethnic NewsWatch, pp. 88-97, p. 93.

<sup>50</sup> J. Don Davis, "Texas U. Law School Has Two Students," in *The Pittsburgh Courier (1911-1950)*; Oct 4, 1947. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Pittsburgh Courier( 1911-2002) p. 4.

<sup>51</sup> Parren J. Mitchell, "National Visionary, First Black Graduate Student Admitted to University of Maryland," interview by National Visionary Leadership Project, not dated, < <http://www.visionaryproject.org/mitchellparren/>> accessed 01/05/2014.

fact that the states expended such resources and funds in order to maintain a social system spoke volumes. The first complaints by individual black applicants elicited enormous responses prior to the mammoth legal battles.

The veterans who broke down barriers in graduate education generally went on to extraordinary civil rights careers. Wiley A. Branton later served as chief counsel for the plaintiffs in the Little Rock, Arkansas school desegregation case and a host of other civil rights work. J. Kenneth Lee worked as the NAACP assistant state council, representing thousands of clients in North Carolina criminal and civil rights cases. He initiated several lawsuits for public and school desegregation in the state. Parren J. Mitchell later became the first African American elected to Congress from Maryland. He helped found the Congressional Black Caucus, and fought for affirmative action in government contracts. Veterans throughout the country used their experience and tenacity and fought to change the social landscape of the United States. Historians rightly point out the limits of the G.I. Bill for African-American veterans. The discrimination and misadministration at the local level barred many veterans, especially in the South, from significant economic improvement. Yet those who found a way into the system set important precedents, paving the way for future desegregation. They helped expand the black middle class, creating a pool of black professionals prepared to carry on the struggle that the older generation of activists had initiated. These veterans helped to modify the way that the next generation considered racial hierarchies and relations.

In one of the biggest programs in the G.I. Bill, those veterans who took advantage of vocational or on-the-job training also attempted to refashion the African American place in the U.S. economic and professional order. Half of all World War II veterans participated in on-the-job training and vocational school. These educational programs included training for a variety of

trades such as auto mechanics, construction, masonry, carpentry, plumbing, electric work, tailoring, machines, barbering, and agricultural (on-the-farm) training.<sup>52</sup> Training programs presented opportunity for black veterans looking to utilize the skills they learned in the military and move up the economic ladder, but without the educational background to take advantage of higher education provisions. George C. Cooper, Director of the Hampton Institute and one of the first black Naval officers (the Golden Thirteen) wrote that on-the job training had vast potential for returning veterans. For many veterans, Cooper speculated, the program could prove a God-send if conducted efficiently and effectively. Indeed, the program seemed off to a good start, except in the case of black veterans. He hypothesized that too many firms would offer training to white men, but not black.<sup>53</sup>

Despite the many administrative hurdles, veterans throughout the country flocked to vocational education programs. Some, like the Dunbar institution in Chicago, blended academic and technical training for African-American veterans.<sup>54</sup> Others wove together on-the-job training and vocational schools.<sup>55</sup> As with many colleges, however, vocational schools often lacked the space to admit the influx of black veterans.<sup>56</sup> Even in Northern states many trade

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<sup>52</sup> Memo, Harold L. Trigg to George S. Mitchell, "Availability of Vocational Courses (trades and Industrial) on Secondary level for Negro Veterans in Institutions. North Carolina Situation, April 14, 1947," 13 May 1947, in Southern Regional Council Papers, Series VII: Veteran's Service Project, 1944-1951, Reel 189, VII: 32. The Southern Regional Council Papers, 1944-1968, microfilm.

<sup>53</sup> Letter George Cooper to 11 Jan 1946, in Southern Regional Council Papers, Series VII: Veteran's Service Project, 1944-1951, Reel 189, VII: 22. The Southern Regional Council Papers, 1944-1968, microfilm.

<sup>54</sup> "Trade Schools Boom as Veterans Pack All Classes," in *Ebony*, Vol. 1, Issue 10, September 1946.

<sup>55</sup> Untitled, Report on South Carolina Vocational Education. Not Dated, p. 5-6, in Southern Regional Council Papers, Series VII: Veteran's Service Project, 1944-1951, Reel 189, VII: 39. The Southern Regional Council Papers, 1944-1968, microfilm.

<sup>56</sup> "Trade Schools Boom as Veterans Pack All Classes," *Ebony*, September 1946.

schools remained segregated and refused to accept black applicants.<sup>57</sup> African-American veterans often entered these vocational programs under the impression that the vocational instructors would not use and abuse them as much as on-the-job-training employers. In vocational schools, they found dilapidated conditions and poor teachers and curriculums. On occasion, unscrupulous people created vocational institutions in order to take advantage of desperate black veterans and benefits from the federal government. Despite of their lack of credibility, many schools still obtained state certification from local agencies.<sup>58</sup> In Texarkana, Arkansas, on-the-farm training schools existed for both black and white veterans. Black veterans did not receive the same level of training at their school, and all the federal tuition money for black veterans went to resources for the white school.<sup>59</sup>

New vocational education programs sprang up throughout the South, targeting veterans and their G.I. Bill benefits. Southern Regional Council director George Mitchell complained, “These classes are mighty weak. Equipment is rudimentary and teaching is poor. Some are described as “fulfill the law” schools to get hold of some of this government money.”<sup>60</sup> One report described a vocational training program as disorderly, located in a small and dirty space,

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<sup>57</sup> Charles A. Davis, “One in 4 Bars Negroes From GI Training,” in *The Chicago Defender (National edition)* (1921-1967); Mar 20, 1948; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975).

<sup>58</sup> Onkst, *First A Negro*, 528.

<sup>59</sup> Letter, George Mitchell to Robert T. Amis, Department of Labor, Retraining and Reemployment Administration. 6 June 1946, in Southern Regional Council Papers, Series VII: Veteran’s Service Project, 1944-1951, Reel 189, VII: 39. The Southern Regional Council Papers, 1944-1968, microfilm; Report: “A Sample of Some of the Evils Found in the educational Setup of Negro Veterans in Arkansas,” not dated, in Southern Regional Council Papers, Series VII: Veteran’s Service Project, 1944-1951, Reel 190, VII: 41. The Southern Regional Council Papers, 1944-1968, microfilm.

<sup>60</sup> Letter, George Mitchell to Mr. Robert H. Owens, June 6, 1946, in Southern Regional Council Papers, Series VII: Veteran’s Service Project, 1944-1951, Reel 189, VII: 38. The Southern Regional Council Papers, 1944-1968, microfilm.

between a shop and a dance hall with constant interruptions from both.<sup>61</sup> In Columbia, South Carolina, a white school administrator, Hugh Stoddard, directed the educational training program for both the black and white schools, dictating much of the policy and rejecting or accepting applications. As Stoddard put it, “I can say yes or not to any of them.” He explained that he determined veterans’ standing in the program through both records and a personal interview. As the Southern Regional Council report noted, social stratification in the South discouraged frankness or straightforwardness from African Americans. If a black veteran challenged a white program director, it constituted “a figurative suicide for that veteran’s plans for education.” Stoddard admitted that he found screening black veterans trying “because they were so difficult to talk to.”<sup>62</sup>

Some programs did meet with a bit of success. In Macon, Georgia, the vocational schools needed greater space and more suitable shops. Overall, however, the system in place worked quite well. Teachers all had training and generally elicited good results from their students. More black veterans participated in these training programs in Macon than white veterans. Reports found that veterans with vocational training in Macon actually had little difficulty obtaining employment in their chosen trade, and many received union skilled wages shortly after employment (most often in bricklaying and shoe repair).<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Report on Black Veterans in Vocational Classroom in Upper South, not dated, in Southern Regional Council Papers, SeriesVII: Veteran’s Service Project, 1944-1951, Reel 189, VII: 38. The Southern Regional Council Papers, 1944-1968, microfilm.

<sup>62</sup> Untitled, Report on South Carolina Vocational Education. not dated, p. 1, in Southern Regional Council Papers, SeriesVII: Veteran’s Service Project, 1944-1951, Reel 189, VII: 39. The Southern Regional Council Papers, 1944-1968, microfilm.

<sup>63</sup> Report, “Mason Vocational Schools,” Not Dated, in Southern Regional Council Papers, SeriesVII: Veteran’s Service Project, 1944-1951, Reel 189, VII: 38. The Southern Regional Council Papers, 1944-1968, microfilm.

In their efforts to obtain on-the-job training and attend vocational schools, African-American veterans found poor local administration and discrimination. Although they found steady and appropriate employment in some areas, more often they met with limited success in their attempts to improve their socioeconomic circumstances and escape the classification of menial laborer.<sup>64</sup> These veterans struggled to obtain more skilled positions in the postwar period, especially with the new specializations they obtained in the military. The quest for employment had other consequences as well. For African Americans who struggled to find work in the postwar period, they still landed in the most dangerous or menial employment. Even as unions incorporated black laborers, rank-and-file racism within companies led to tense working conditions. The sight of large numbers of unemployed black men in many urban centers buttressed patterns of discrimination and the stereotypical image of black male shiftlessness in the underclass. In the postwar period, urban centers also experienced periods of deindustrialization into the 1950s. Manufacturing jobs migrated to suburban and rural areas where labor and tax costs were lower, leaving an unemployed underclass in the cities.<sup>65</sup>

Patterns of employment had shifted during the Second World War as large numbers of African Americans migrated to urban areas in the North for defense work. The Chicago Branch of the American Council on Race Relations found that after 1942, American industrial occupations diversified because of defense work.<sup>66</sup> Some of these gains were short lived with backlash and abundant layoffs as white veterans returned home. Yet African Americans maintained some postwar gains. From 1944 to 1947, the percentage of black federal employees

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<sup>64</sup> Onkst, "First a Negro," 523-527, 517.

<sup>65</sup> Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 109, 120-121, 126, 128, 138.

<sup>66</sup> "Weaver Cites Negro Job Gains," in *The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967)*; Feb 23, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975), p. 7.

only fell slightly, and black numbers in the mid-reaches of the federal bureaucracy had increased.<sup>67</sup> Greater numbers of skilled black employees, veterans and non-veterans, contributed to the proliferation of labor unions in the South following the war. Organizations like the Congress of Industrial Organizations moved into the South for the first time in 1946. The CIO simultaneously advocated eradication of the poll tax and racial discrimination with its southern drive, “Operation Dixie.”<sup>68</sup> As one reporter noted, past efforts at unionization in the South had encountered a militant and well organized hate movement—“financed by employers and supported in many cases by the political power of towns, counties, and whole states.” This time around, the race baiters and anti-labor groups had much more trouble whipping up the population. It represented, argued the reporter, the first time a part of the white southern population saw the economic advantage to unionism, rather than just siding with the KKK. The CIO worked carefully and avoided overly-bold statements on the place of African Americans in the union. As a result, the organization won a number of bargaining elections and recruited significant numbers of new members.<sup>69</sup>

For those black veterans without access to this social mobility, many refused to take jobs for which they were overqualified. Some preferred to take advantage of the unemployment provisions in the G.I. Bill until suitable work came along. Again, they encountered the problem that white VA counselors often felt that any job was “suitable” for black veterans.<sup>70</sup> Yet in their

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<sup>67</sup> Samuel Krislov, *The Negro in Federal Employment* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1967), 34.

<sup>68</sup> Walter W. Ruch, “CIO Wil Seek End of South’s Poll Tax: Murray Says ‘Operation Dixie’ Aims at the ‘Emancipation,’ of a Million Workers,” in *The New York Times (1923-Current file)*; Apr 11, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2009), p. 30.

<sup>69</sup> A.G. Mezerik, “The C.I.O Southern Drive,” in *The Nation: A Liberal Weekly Devoted to Politics, Economics, Science, Foreign Affairs, Literature, Drama, and the Arts* 164, no. 2, (1947), 38-40.

<sup>70</sup> Onkst, “First a Negro,” 521.

refusals to be re-relegated to menial labor, black veterans rejected the racial hierarchy and engaged in a battle for social mobility. Many, like Charles Berry when he returned to Chattanooga and found he could only acquire work as a bellhop, reentered the military. Marine George Kidd made his career in the military, advancing to First Sergeant. Kidd spent his youth as a sharecropper in Louisiana, and when he entered the military he found an entirely new realm of possibility. There, he learned that he had the capacity for leadership, and by the early 1950s he found himself training black and white marines alike<sup>71</sup> In general, these men refused to come home and fall back into the unskilled industries they had dominated in the pre-war economy. Administrators and white society recognized this, and pushed back, attempting to convince African Americans that they belonged in particular roles, refusing to allow them into other industries and unions, or grant many unemployment benefits.

Sociologist Maurice Halbwach explained in his theory of collective memory that groups recognize certain traits as indicative of group membership. These group members recognize one another and work to preserve their version of collective memory. In this American context, with Kelley's notions of interracial etiquette, African Americans violated these social boundaries in their attempts toward upward mobility. The American racial hierarchy dictated that African Americans should occupy certain social spaces and economic positions. Particular occupations were considered unsuitable for a group on the lower end of the hierarchy. In turn, African Americans resisted this classification and attempted to scale the social ladder and reshape a racial and class consciousness. As they moved back into civilian society in large numbers, they had to figure out how to reshape their social, economic, and political lives. Their temporary wartime removal from society forced them to reassess these issues, and their new consciousness made them more prone to resisting the prewar norms. A struggle ensued. Black veterans made a

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<sup>71</sup> George Kidd, interview by Sarah Barksdale, 7 Nov 2011, Fort Washington, Maryland.

political declaration and worked to form their own framework for collective consciousness, and the dominant group resisted and struck back. In their rejection, black veterans challenged what Kelley termed “learned positions,” which dictated group place in a social hierarchy. Much as Richard Wright wrote about his Jim Crow education, crossing social boundaries could be risky and uncertain. When they exercised these choices, veterans opposed these roles that social and political culture deemed appropriate for African Americans.

In addition, the increase in African Americans in the military, particularly with Truman’s Executive Order, signified a continued display of that black male citizenship that many white Americans found so alarming throughout the war.<sup>72</sup> Their presence without segregation in the military continued to shift American collective memory. During World War II, it was evident that the dominant white position in the United States supported the idea that black men did not belong in uniform, or at least not in combat roles. White military reports continuously stripped them of their masculinity, denouncing their fighting capabilities, noting their tendency to “melt away,” under fire, making any attacks possible to the presence of black men in the military. With the postwar period, integration and Korea, and the influx of black men into the military generally, black men started serving disproportionate numbers and more often in combat positions. While this too, was problematic, at the time it demonstrated a political choice on their part and the beginning of a shift in the nation’s collective memory. George Kidd rejected his learned social and economic position, picking cotton in rural Louisiana, and eventually worked his way into a position where he commanded white men. His story reveals the changing nature of racial affairs in the postwar period. The choices these veterans made, in turn, demonstrated

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<sup>72</sup> MacGregor, *Integration of the Armed Forces*, 152. African-American reenlistment climbed quickly after the war, it was much greater than the military had expected. In 1945 and 1946, the percentages of African Americans in the Army eclipsed the wartime high of 9.68% and was projected to reach 15% by 1947.

widespread shifts in the understanding of social spaces, interracial relations, and racial-economic hierarchies in the United States.

With each of these seemingly apolitical choices came strong repercussions from the white community. Oftentimes the retaliation manifested as whites blocked black access to benefits, education, jobs, and training. All too frequently, the level of backlash intensified and violent clashes ensued. As NAACP Executive Secretary Walter White termed it, a dread epidemic swept the nation in 1946. Black veterans like Isaac Woodard faced hostile responses for a variety of supposed offenses against whites, anything from wearing a uniform to refusing to brook disrespect. The intensity and frequency of the clashes revealed the presence of changing attitudes in the postwar periods. Violence often occurred or escalated because black veterans responded to white violence and disrespect forcefully. Again, black veterans transgressed social boundaries and overstepped acceptable standards for interracial interactions. They displayed black masculinity publically and challenged the “Jim Crow” education so ingrained in the American consciousness.

James Stephenson had received his discharge in early 1946 after earlier enlisting in the Navy at age sixteen. He returned home to Columbia, Tennessee. That February, Stephenson accompanied his mother to a radio repair shop to inquire about a product she had sent in for repair. A dispute arose between his mother, Mrs. Gladys Stephenson, and a white repairman and World War II veteran, William Fleming. Witnesses reported that Fleming seemed to resent an African-American woman taking issue with his work. When the pair left the shop, Fleming followed, cursing and shouting at Gladys Stephenson. At that point, Fleming either struck Gladys Stephenson, prompting swift retaliation from her son, or James Stephenson struck Fleming, resenting the insults to his mother. Regardless of how it began, James Stephenson then

sent Fleming through a storefront window, and a number of white civilians and law enforcement rushed to the white man's aid. A policeman "struck at Stephenson with his night stick," as Mrs. Stephenson yelled at them not to hit her son.<sup>73</sup> James Stephenson "stood his ground like the man the Navy had taught him he is."<sup>74</sup> The officer also used force on Mrs. Stephenson, striking her in the eye.

Local police arrested both James and Gladys Stephenson, charging them with assault. Tensions in Columbia escalated rapidly and crowds of whites gathered in the public square, jeering and threatening to lynch the pair. Meanwhile, local African Americans withdrew to the black business district and prominent black citizens gathered bail for the Stephensons. White citizens moved quickly as well, and before the Stephensons were removed to a safe location, a mob of about seventy-five white men gathered at the jail, demanding entry. Only the actions of the sheriff, J.J. Underwood, who leveled a submachine gun at the mob and ordered them to disperse, prevented a lynching.<sup>75</sup> "I said if they didn't leave I'd lock up every one of them," recalled Underwood.<sup>76</sup> The Stephensons made bail and boarded a train to Chicago.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Pamphlet, prepared by the Social Science Institute at Fisk University, "A Monthly Summary of Events and Trends in Race Relations," (summary of the month of February), March 1946, Vol 3, No. 8, pg 233 folder 40 Race Relations: Pamphlets, correspondence, Reports, 1945-1946, box 2; UAW Fair Practices Department; Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

<sup>74</sup> Vincent Tubbs, "Columbia Trial Proves Solidarity of Southerners," in *Afro-American (1893-1988)*; Oct 12, 1946; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Baltimore Afro-American (1893-1988), p. 3.

<sup>75</sup> Pamphlet, prepared by the Social Science Institute at Fisk University, "A Monthly Summary of Events and Trends in Race Relations," (summary of the month of February), March 1946, Vol 3, No. 8, pg 233 folder 40 Race Relations: Pamphlets, correspondence, Reports, 1945-1946, box 2; UAW Fair Practices Department; Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI

<sup>76</sup> Robert Cromie, "Race Riot Trial Bars Story of Attack on Jail: Prelude to Clash Ruled Out as Evidence," in *Chicago Daily Tribune (1923-1963)*; Sep 22, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune (1849-1988), p. 25.

<sup>77</sup> "Columbia, TENN., Trial Told of Lynch Threat," in the *New York Times (1923-Current File)*; Oct 1, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2008), p. 4.

Removing the sources of the mob's ire did not end the violence. Black citizens, lacking faith in the authorities' ability to avert mob action, prepared to defend themselves. Soon, gunfire and shouts rang throughout the city. White police officers entered the black business district, investigating reports of shooting. The African Americans in the area interpreted their entry as the beginning of an attack, and fired upon the police officers, wounding two. Later that evening, Tennessee Governor Jim McCord called out the State Guard and Highway Patrol to cordon off the black district and watch the African American community. At dawn the next morning, the Highway Patrol moved into the street and quelled resistance, arresting about seventy African Americans.<sup>78</sup> Authorities charged twenty-five of the arrested African Americans with participating in the disorder. NAACP attorney Thurgood Marshall defended the citizens in Columbia, Tennessee before an all-white jury.<sup>79</sup> The black press alleged that the judge suppressed evidence, choked off testimony damaging to the state, and frequently overruled the defense's objections to the prosecution's tactics. When the trial began, the judge also refused to admit evidence of the lynch mob at the jail, searching for James and Gladys Stephenson.<sup>80</sup> At the end of the trial, the jury acquitted all but two of the defendants.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Pamphlet, prepared by the Social Science Institute at Fisk University, "A Monthly Summary of Events and Trends in Race Relations," (summary of the month of February), March 1946, Vol 3, No. 8, pg 233 folder 40 Race Relations: Pamphlets, correspondence, Reports, 1945-1946, box 2; UAW Fair Practices Department; Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI; "Racial Incident in Tennessee Town Brings Troops to Scene," *The Sun (1837-1986)*; Feb 26, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Baltimore Sun, The (1837-1986), p. 3.

<sup>79</sup> "Columbia Riot Victims Tried By All-White Jury," *The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967)*; Nov 23, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975) p. 2.

<sup>80</sup> Robert Cromie, "Race Riot Trial Bars Story of Attack on Jail: Prelude to Clash Ruled Out as Evidence," *Chicago Daily Tribune (1923-1963)*; Sep 22, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune (1849-1988), p. 25.

<sup>81</sup> Enoch P. Waters, Jr., "23 Riot Victims Freed: Columbia Jury Stuns National With Acquittals; Two Convicted," *The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967)*; Oct 12, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975), p. 1.

In the Stephenson ordeal in Tennessee, a black veteran bucked social norms. James Stephenson publically contradicted and refused to endure verbal abuse by a white man, and then either initiated physical contact or retaliated to Fleming's aggression. With his actions, Stephenson publically asserted and displayed his masculinity. W.E.B. Du Bois pointed out the relationship between violence, manhood, and freedom in his work *Black Reconstruction*, reflecting how curious it was that "only murder makes men."<sup>82</sup> When black veterans acted violently either in self-defense or in response to disrespect, they built an image of black masculinity, based on the American martial ideals of citizenship. Veterans like Robert F. Williams who advocated armed self-defense took the notion a step further and appropriated the type of martial masculinity learned in a military environment in order to advocate for black equality and manhood. In Stephenson's case, he publically asserted his masculinity in the altercation with Fleming, even more so because Fleming was a white veteran, the paragon of American masculinity. Not only did Stephenson assert black masculinity, but he simultaneously upbraided white American manhood, an even more egregious offense to the white community in Columbia, Tennessee. Furthermore, Stephenson acted in defense of his mother, protecting black womanhood or more specifically motherhood, an act systematically denied to black men in the United States.

The white community in Columbia recognized this breach of racial and gender etiquette and reacted violently, attempting to lynch James and Gladys Stephenson. As a response to this response, the African-American community rose in defense of Stephenson and attempted to send the pair to safety, and then established their own self-defense against further white violence.

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<sup>82</sup> Carole Emberton, "Only Murder Makes Men": Reconsidering the Black Military Experience," *The Journal of the Civil War Era* 2, no. 3, (2012), 369-370. Emberton looks at the way that black veterans of the American Civil War used the rhetoric of martial manhood to win rights, but how in the decade following the war this discourse that seemed so vital and held so much political currency lost value.

Robin D.G. Kelley pointed out that an individual act of resistance with no political intent had the potential to spark collective group resistance, though these skirmishes demonstrated the limits to resistance as much as the possibilities.<sup>83</sup> In Columbia, Tennessee, this was most certainly the case. The incident inflamed both the black and white communities and incited larger group violence though perhaps not sustained resistance. The publicity of the incident left an imprint on the collective memory of the two groups. This incident coincided with other violent episodes, and the press expressed its strong condemnation of the anti-black violence, one journalist referring to it as the “Columbia pogrom [that] grew out of the refusal of a Negro naval veteran to stand supinely by and allow his mother to be abused.”<sup>84</sup>

White Americans perpetrated violence to reinforce the hierarchical racial structure in U.S. society, and occasionally in response to perceived boundary crossing. In Isaac Woodard’s case, when the bus driver refused to let the man relieve his bladder, Woodard reacted with harsh language and committed an act of racial transgression. For this refusal to brook disrespect from whites and public assertion of his humanity and masculinity with words and military dress—“I am a man, just like you,” snapped Woodard—whites took violent and retributive action. Woodard’s case more obviously provoked larger institutional and structural change. The NAACP defended him and while he did not necessarily receive individual justice, the attention the incident garnered can be directly linked to shifts in the country’s policies of segregation.

As white Americans continued committing violence on African-American veterans throughout 1946, the veterans continued to fight back both physically and verbally. In late summer 1946 an incident occurred in Sullivan’s Hollow, Smith County Mississippi, leading to

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<sup>83</sup> Kelley, “We Are Not What We Seem,” 103.

<sup>84</sup> Enoc P. Waters, Jr., “Ignorance Rivals Brutality in Lynchers: Look Closely Appeasers!” *The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967)*; Aug 24, 1946; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975), p. 13.

increasing violence against African Americans, particularly black veterans. African Americans in Smith County described intense anti-black sentiment—the worst in the state, many claimed. The white sheriff's deputy in Sullivan's Hollow, Fal McAlpin, reportedly harbored particular animosity toward black veterans. Rumor had it that McAlpin shot a black veteran earlier that summer, running the man out of town. Tensions had been growing steadily since V-J Day. In August 1946, Johnny and Garfield Craft, veterans of the Marine Corps and Army respectively, faced-off with the deputy. The Craft brothers refused to let McAlpin intimidate them. When the deputy and a number of other white men tried to beat them and drag them out of a truck, the brothers resisted and fired shots to scatter the group.<sup>85</sup>

The incident did not end there. Later that evening, a carload of police officers arrived at the Craft's farm. The family had just arrived home from church, recalled the veterans' mother, Rachel Craft. There were ten people in the house, most under fifteen years of age. Six or seven men surged out of the car, yelled halt, and then without warning began firing into the house. At the first lull in the gunfire, twenty-one year old Johnny came out of hiding and declared it would be a shame for the entire family to die at the same time. He grabbed a shotgun and fired an undetermined number of shots, wounding one police officer. At the end of the standoff, four officers lay wounded and law enforcement succeeded in taking a number of Craft family members into custody. Johnny, Garfield, and several others had escaped into the Mississippi swampland surrounding the farm. Rachel Craft protested that she could not understand why her eleven year old son was among those taken into custody. Deputies avowed that the young man

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid. And Samuel Hoskins, "Mother Tells of Mob's Attack on Family of 11," in the *Afro-American (1893-1988)*; Aug 31, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Baltimore Afro-American (1893-1988), p. 14.

was armed with a .22 rifle, and other African Americans at the farm had fired with Army carbines.<sup>86</sup>

A manhunt ensued. Over three-hundred armed white men from Smith and surrounding counties tracked the black veterans through the swamps of Mississippi with bloodhounds. The posse threatened to lynch the veterans if found. Only a quick publicity campaign prevented further mob violence. The Assistant U.S. Attorney General wired the District Attorney to ensure observance of the law, and Walter White and the NAACP sent similar messages to acting Mississippi governor Fielding Wright. They warned the Smith County Sheriff that if a lynching occurred, it would be impossible to claim that the perpetrators could not be identified. The remaining fugitives soon surrendered. Johnny Craft made his way to Jackson before his surrender. He rang the jail bell and announced, "I'm Johnnie Craft. I want to be locked up for safekeeping."<sup>87</sup> An all-white Smith County jury later found Johnnie Craft guilty of attempted murder.<sup>88</sup> Four other members of the Craft family were also sentenced to ten years in prison for assault with intent to kill. The one white defendant, held on the same charge, was granted a continuance.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> "Posse Seizes 8 in Mississippi Ambush Attack," *The Washington Post (1923-1954)*; Aug 20, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Washington Post (1877-1995), p. 4. The white press reported that deputies were struck by shotgun charges as they approached the Craft family home, and that they came to investigate reports that an African American fired upon a white motorist in a highway dispute earlier that day; Samuel Hoskins, "Mother Tells of Mob's Attack on Family of 11," *Afro-American (1893-1988)*; Aug 31, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Baltimore Afro-American (1893-1988), p. 14.

<sup>87</sup> Samuel Hoskins, "Clerics, Teacher Beaten; Girls Attacked in Reign of Terror After Mississippi Manhunt," *Afro-American (1893-1988)*; Aug 31, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Baltimore Afro-American (1893-1988), p. 1; "Posse Seizes 8 in Mississippi Ambush Attack," *The Washington Post (1923-1954)*; Aug 20, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Washington Post (1877-1995), p. 4.

<sup>88</sup> "Convict Ex-GI for Defending Family Home," *The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1912-1967)*; Nov 9, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975), p. 1.

<sup>89</sup> "Sullivan Hollow Negroes Get 10 Year Sentences," *The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967)*; Nov 23, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975), p. 1.

Much like the incident in Tennessee, the Crafts' individual acts of resistance in Mississippi sparked small collective resistance, though in this instance within a family. The Crafts acted in self-defense, but throughout the ordeal they refused to allow white law enforcement to intimidate and bully them. This rejection of the deputy's authority struck a blow at white authority in an official capacity. In addition, their possession and use of military weapons represented a martial claim to citizenship and masculinity. The Crafts' initial resistance provoked a swift response from the white community when an entire squad of deputies showed up on the Craft property because black men had transgressed racial and gendered boundaries; they affronted white American masculinity with their resistance to the deputy's attempts to drag them bodily from their vehicle. Whites could not allow the slight to white male dominance, dependent on the subservience and emasculation of the "Other." When the Craft family began firing on white male authority figures, the response became even greater, and hundreds of white men combed the swamps to enact "justice." The Craft brothers unintentionally struck a blow at the system of segregation and racial protocol in the South by trying to retain their dignity and later their lives.

Caught in a wave of violence, African-American veterans exhibited an unwillingness to endure certain types of treatment as they arrived home. When white civilians, servicemen, or veterans, spoke disrespectfully or attempted to perpetrate violence upon them, black veterans fought back. Both the black and white presses contained accounts of these violent postwar skirmishes, imprinting the challenge on the nation's collective memory. At times, the white press depicted rebellious African Americans as ungrateful, violent, and criminal. While collective memory might have been shifting, white social depiction and notions of blackness could shift to something equally damaging. Their seemingly apolitical actions produced larger

political repercussions. These actions were possible in the period following World War II as never before. In Johnny Craft's case, the NAACP obtained the protection of the federal establishment. While federal justice was still limited at this point, black veterans had greater ability to perpetrate these acts of self-defense or retaliation. Although they faced violent repercussions, greater and more forceful organizational presence (as chapter 6 corroborates) meant these actors could potentially obtain greater support.

Moreover, political action spurred greater white backlash and violence as white citizens recognized black attempts to claim citizenship rights. In the postwar period, African-American veterans increasingly participated in the political process and attempted to exercise their voting rights. Military service exempted veterans from paying a poll tax.<sup>90</sup> The Supreme Court had overturned the white primary in 1946 (*Smith v. Allright*), contending that denying African Americans the primary vote violated the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> amendments. The issue heated up with the 1946 primary elections. States struggled to work around the *Smith v. Allright* decision, and politicians panicked. Senator Theodore Bilbo even called upon his constituents to resort to any means necessary to keep African Americans from the polls.<sup>91</sup> Bilbo complained that "thousands of Negroes, especially Negro soldiers who are exempt from paying poll taxes are registering or attempting to register. These Negroes have no right to do and they must not and should not be permitted to do."<sup>92</sup> Congressman John E. Rankin and other candidates followed suit, making it

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<sup>90</sup> "White Supremacy Wins: Traditional Denial of Voting Right Broken As Bilbo, Rankin Win FIRST VOTE," *The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967)*; July 13, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975), p. 1.

<sup>91</sup> "Bilbo Screams Mob Violence: Demands Whites Keep Negroes From Polls," *The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967)*; Jun 29, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975), p. 1; "Bilbo Urges Mississippi Men to Employ 'Any Means' to Bar Negroes from Voting," in *The New York Times (1923-Current file)*; Jun 23, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2009), p. 30.

<sup>92</sup> "Veteran Beaten; Bilbo urges Violence to Stop Negro Vote," *The Pittsburgh Courier (1911-1950)*; Jun 29, 1946; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Pittsburgh Courier (1911-2002), p. 14.

clear that they opposed the black vote. Veterans often constituted a majority of those registered to vote in the South. In one informal poll in Birmingham, Alabama, reporters found that of forty-eight registered African Americans, forty-five were veterans.<sup>93</sup>

Etoy Fletcher, a black veteran in Mississippi, attempted to register to vote in Brandon, Mississippi. The clerk told Fletcher that he needed to read a pamphlet on the U.S. constitution before voting. As Fletcher left the clerk's office, he charged that four white men seized him, forced him into an automobile, stripped him down and flogged him..<sup>94</sup> Fletcher and other African Americans, many of them veterans, later testified before the Senate Campaign Investigating Committee in Mississippi on intimidation and violence at the polls after the elections. Fletcher wore his Good Conduct Medal to the hearing. As the black citizens testified, Senator Bilbo sat smiling. His enjoyment of the situation seemed infectious, described one reporter, as by the end of the session committee members laughed, winked at each other, and fired questions at witnesses.<sup>95</sup> Another black veteran testified that he heard Bilbo say in a speech, "If any Negro is caught organizing voters, tar and feather him, and don't forget the match." The veteran said he voted anyway, but believed that the speech had intimidated others in the community.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Marcel Hopson and Barbara Wheeler, "Would-Be Voters Greeted by Silly Queries of Registrar," *Afro-American (1893-1988)*; Jan 21, 1950; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Baltimore Afro-American, (1893-1988), p. A20.

<sup>94</sup> "Bilbo Inquiry Hears Negro Tell of Attack: Veteran Who Sought to Vote Says White Men Whipped Him," *The Washington Post (1923-1954)*; Dec 3, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Washington Post (1877-1996), p. 1; "Veteran Beaten; Bilbo urges Violence to Stop Negro Vote: Bulletin!" in *The Pittsburgh Courier (1911-1950)*; Jun 29, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Pittsburgh Courier (1911-2002), p. 14.

<sup>95</sup> Harold B. Hinton, "20 Negroes Blame Vote Ban on Bilbo: GI Says He Was Beaten to Balk Registration—Hearing Arouses Laughter of Audience," *The New York Times (1923-Current file)*; Dec 3, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2009), p. 1. Reports note that the town had a white witness testify that Fletcher said his assailants were black, not white men.

<sup>96</sup> "Negroes Tell of Beatings at Miss. Polls: Bulldozing Tactics Charged; 'What Kind of Flowers Do You Want?' Voter Asked," *The Washington Post (1923-1954)*; Dec 4, 1946; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Washington Post (1877-1996), p. 1.

Throughout the South, black veterans encountered similar problems as they attempted to register and vote. Like Senator Bilbo, Southern whites industriously circulated the warning that any African Americans attempting to vote could meet serious repercussions. Medgar and Charles Evers tried to cast their votes in the 1946 primaries in Mississippi. The brothers went to the Newton County courthouse to register, despite threats from local whites. Charles Evers remembered that Bilbo raved that the “best way to stop niggers from votin’ is to visit them the night before the election.” Un-intimidated, the Evers brothers retorted, “Let them come one and visit us. We are going to kill all you white folks.” On Election Day, Charles, Medgar, and four other black veterans showed up at the courthouse to vote. A cluster of armed and angry white men stood blocking the courthouse and the ballot box as the county sheriff watched. Charles, armed with a .38 and a switchblade, wanted to force a confrontation; “I really wanted to die that day,” he later wrote. Medgar convinced him that the bloodshed was not worth it, and told his older brother, “We’ll get them next time.”<sup>97</sup>

Aaron Henry of Clarksdale, Mississippi, also attempted to vote in the 1946 primaries, and encouraged other black veterans to do the same and take advantage of the poll tax exemption. Henry attempted to register three separate times, and each time the registrar claimed he knew nothing about an exemption. Eventually, Henry turned up a white veteran to present his exemption certificate. The registrar gave up and finally allowed Henry to register. Aaron Henry was the first African American in Coahoma County, Mississippi to vote in the democratic primary. The next day, he sent the registrar a thank-you note.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Myrlie Evers-Williams & Manning Marable, ed. *The Autobiography of Medgar Evers: A Hero's Life and Legacy Revealed Through His Writings, Letters, and Speeches* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2005), 7; Charles Evers, *Evers*, ed. Grace Halsell (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1971), 92-95.

<sup>98</sup> Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 57.

In Taylor County, Georgia, whites posted a sign on one black church saying, “The First Nigger to Vote Will Never Vote Again.”<sup>99</sup> Veteran Macio Snipes never voted in his life.<sup>100</sup> When Snipes heard the threats, however, he decided to accept the challenge. He registered in his hometown of Rupert, Georgia, and on Election Day Snipes cast his vote.<sup>101</sup> Although other African Americans had registered, Snipes was the only Taylor county African American to vote in the election and cast the lone vote against Eugene Talmadge. Friends and neighbors believed that the act had signed Snipes’ death warrant.<sup>102</sup> A week later, four white men drove up to Snipes’ home, called him outside, and then “riddled him with bullets” before driving away.<sup>103</sup> The coroner’s jury later acquitted the four white men on a plea of self-defense.<sup>104</sup>

Alabama passed its Boswell Amendment in 1946 as a response to the *Smith* decision. The Amendment required voters to understand and explain any section of the United States Constitution as requested.<sup>105</sup> In Birmingham, the Southern Negro Youth Congress sponsored a registration drive in early 1946. One hundred black veterans, led by Captain H.C. Terrell, a U.S.

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<sup>99</sup> Gail Buckley, *American Patriots: The Story of Blacks in the Military from the Revolution to Desert Storm* (New York: Random House, 2001), 337.

<sup>100</sup> Reports differ as to spelling, some say Macio, some Maceo.

<sup>101</sup> Ray Sprigle, “I Was a Negro: In the South for 30 Days! GI Made Fatal Mistake When He Tried To Prove He Had the Right to Vote in GA,” *The Pittsburgh Courier* (1911-1950); Sep 18, 1948. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Pittsburgh Courier (1911-2002), p. 1. Incorrectly refers to him as “Macy Yost Snipes.”

<sup>102</sup> “The Price of Voting,” *New York Amsterdam News* (1943-1961); Aug 10, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Amsterdam News (1922-1993), p. 10; “Veteran, County’s Lone Voter, Assassinated by 4 White Men,” *Afro-American* (1893-1988); Aug 3, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Baltimore Afro-American (1893-1988), p. 1.

<sup>103</sup> Ray Sprigle, “I Was a Negro: In the South for 30 Days! GI Made Fatal Mistake When He Tried To Prove He Had the Right to Vote in GA,” in *The Pittsburgh Courier* (1911-1950); Sep 18, 1948. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Pittsburgh Courier (1911-2002), p. 1.

<sup>104</sup> “Veteran, County’s Lone Voter, Assassinated by 4 White Men,” *Afro-American* (1893-1988); Aug 3, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Baltimore Afro-American (1893-1988), p. 1.

<sup>105</sup> Wilson Fallin, *The African American Church in Birmingham, Alabama, 1815-1963: A Shelter in the Storm* (New York: Garland Publishers, 1997), 131.

Army chaplain on terminal leave, marched through the streets of Birmingham in a mass effort to register for the vote. The majority of the veterans were denied registration because they could not answer questions to the effect of, “What is the Constitution made of?” or “How does the Government of the U.S. operate?” Veterans carried signs as they marched reading, “Veterans. Join Us to Register. Bring Your Discharge Papers.” MPs soon arrested Captain Terrell after receiving complaints that he was leading a political demonstration, and Army officials warned him not to use the Army uniform for any political purposes. Terrell argued that the point of the movement was to increase the number of registered voters and protect the interests of black veterans in the political process.<sup>106</sup>

The Arkansas assembly also passed a number of bills designed to keep blacks from the ballot box in 1946 as well.<sup>107</sup> Governor Benjamin Laney declared that the Justice Department could take what action it liked, but that in Arkansas the state would conduct the primary elections as it had always done. The Legislature passed an act separating the Democratic primaries for State offices and those for Federal offices, frankly admitting that with the act they intended to prevent African Americans from voting in the State elections, even if the Supreme Court declared it unconstitutional to bar blacks from voting in Federal elections.<sup>108</sup> Veteran Wiley A. Branton found trouble with the law in Arkansas before becoming one of the first African Americans to attend the University of Arkansas Law School. In Pine Bluff, Branton and a group of African Americans put together a voter education campaign to educate people on the

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<sup>106</sup> “Alabama Denies Vote Right to Scores of Negro Veterans,” *The Pittsburgh Courier (1911-1950)*; Feb 2, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Pittsburgh Courier (1911-2002), p. 20.

<sup>107</sup> John H. Young III, “Arkansas Assembly Moves to Disfranchise Negroes of State By Approving Two Voting Bills,” *The Pittsburgh Courier (1911-1950)*; Mar 31, 1945. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Pittsburgh Courier (1911-2002), p. 12.

<sup>108</sup> “Gov. Laney Bars Vote By Arkansas Negroes,” *The New York Times (1923-Current file)*; Apr 7, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2009), p. 36.

mechanics of voting. He remarked, “I returned to Pine Bluff with a deep feeling that if I could go to the Pacific and fight to ‘help make the world safe for democracy,’ I would certainly try and bring some democracy to Arkansas.”<sup>109</sup> Voting could be a complicated process with confusing paper ballots and a poll tax in place. Approaching the 1948 election, the group distributed some sample ballots to educate African Americans about voting. The Jefferson County Municipal Court prosecuted Branton for printing unofficial ballots. “I happen to have the privilege of being the only person who has ever been charged under that act, let alone convicted,” Branton recalled. The county court fined him, and when Branton appealed this decision, the Supreme Court of Arkansas affirmed his conviction. The U.S. Supreme Court then declined to grant certiorari, confirming the conviction and giving Branton a permanent misdemeanor on his record. Without the unfortunate legal experience, however, Branton may not have made the decision to go to law school.<sup>110</sup>

Whites and African Americans reacted to the Supreme Court decision in *Smith v. Allwright*. Like Etoy Fletcher, scores of black veterans had never voted in their lives. In response to white attempts to intimidate and deny them their full citizenship, however, veterans suddenly started voting and participating in the political process—a black backlash to white reactionary politics and intimidation. Their will, developed for many as they fought overseas, and their poll tax exemption placed them in a unique position for this struggle. As they arrived home, white Americans repeatedly told them, “no,” and African-American veterans refused to

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<sup>109</sup> Wiley A. Branton, Commencement Address, Antioch School of Law, 22 May 1988, Wiley A. Branton Papers, box Wiley A. Branton Papers, Writings by Branton 187-11, Folder: 28 Writings by Branton—Remarks . . . Thirteenth Annual Commencement Exercises of the Antioch School of Law, May 22, 1988; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spangarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>110</sup> Wiley A. Branton, “Advice and Dissent,” in the *Pine Bluff Commercial*, excerpt from a commencement address delivered at University of Arkansas School of Law, Little Rock. 2 June 1980, Wiley A. Branton Papers, box 187-10, Folder 14 “Advice and Dissent,” *Pine Bluff Commercial*, June 2, 1980; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spangarn Research Center, Howard University.

accept the verdict. In their refusal to bend or yield to intimidation, scare tactics, or violence by white southerners, the veterans exhibited a black masculinity as well, threatening white political, social, and economic dominance.

In his essay, “The Souls of White Folk,” Du Bois posed the question: what is whiteness that one should want it? Whiteness is the “ownership of the earth,” and the consciousness of high descent that brings the desire to spread the gift, the “obligation of nobility to ignoble.” Yet when the black man starts to dispute the white title and authority, “When his attitude toward charity is sullen anger rather than humble jollity; when he insists on his human right to swagger and swear and waste,—then the spell is suddenly broken and the philanthropist is ready to believe that Negroes are impudent, that the South is right. . . . After this the descent to hell is easy.” With the spell broken, the deep-seated racial hatred surfaced. Du Bois had witnessed an educated white gentleman become livid because a quiet black woman sat by herself in a Pullman car and a grown white man curse at a small black child who wandered into the white waiting-room.<sup>111</sup> When people transgressed social boundaries, even unintentionally, they met with white fury, and a “deep and passionate hatred, vast by the very vagueness of its expression.”<sup>112</sup>

Black veterans moved across the colorline, opposing the established racial hierarchies. Even very small actions had the potential to disrupt the intricately constructed social arrangement. As Du Bois pointed out, whites occupied a certain position within a racial hierarchy, where whiteness constituted the fundamental tenant of morality, and blacks occupied a subordinate position socially, politically, and economically. Whites assumed a philanthropic or patriarchal position, and in their philanthropy or hand-me-downs to African Americans, whites

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<sup>111</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Souls of White Folk,” in *W.E.B. Du Bois: Writings*, 924-925.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid*, 925.

expected to receive appreciation and deference.<sup>113</sup> When African Americans started to dispute the white claims to nobility, the descent to hell began, and their transgressions unleashed a string of vicious incidents in the postwar period. Du Bois also noted that whites truly believed in their own superiority, this position of nobility in relation to the ignoble.

Sociologist Maurice Halbwachs examined the idea of the noble class in Europe, and argued that beneath the fiction of noble blood, noble gentlemen held sincere convictions of the merits and superiority of their own group, they believed that their group was the “most precious and irreplaceable—and also the most active and beneficent—part of society.” Because of this conviction, and the understanding of how to act within this social system, transmitted from generation to generation, social evolution was a slow process. People of each period remain immersed in the past, making it difficult to understand and accept new social systems or social transgressions. Social institutions are constructed on a foundation of remembrances, understandings of how to behave within a social system (collective memory).<sup>114</sup> A fusion of these ideas describes the social situation in this post-World War II United States context. The ingrained understanding of the social system, especially in the ruling group, meant that the collective memory and understanding of how to behave in certain social situations, the place of various groups in the social order, was rooted in the past, and whites especially could not immediately grasp the logic of a new system. The ruling group subsequently lashed out, at times violently, bringing any force at its disposal to bear against the advent of desegregation and as these on the lower rungs of the social ladder transgressed boundaries and unwritten laws.

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<sup>113</sup> Du Bois, “The Souls of White Folk,” 924-926.

<sup>114</sup> Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 125-126.

In 1945, poet Gwendolyn Brooks wrote a series about African-American troops. She posed the question, relevant to black troops in combat, “even if we come out standing up/How shall we smile, congratulate: and how/Settle in chairs?” Brooks and others in the black community predicted early that the transition out of war and into civilian society would be particularly difficult for black veterans.<sup>115</sup> In 1949 she reiterated this thought in her volume of poetry, *Annie Allen*:

With his helmet’s final doff  
Soldier lifts his power off.  
Soldier bare and chilly then  
Wants his power back again.<sup>116</sup>

Brooks expressed one of the central dilemmas of the black veteran’s experience. She depicted the military experience as a powerful enabler for black masculinity, despite the limitations placed upon that service. Once these veterans returned to the homefront with a hostile reception awaiting them, they found that sense of power and masculinity difficult if not impossible to relinquish. The black press corroborated, and depicted the veterans’ experiences as revolutionizing. *Chicago Defender* correspondent Enoc P. Waters explained that as the veterans began to return home, after living in “New York, Los Angeles, Paris, London, Sydney, Shanghai and elsewhere around the globe. . . . They saw more clearly than even their parents what was wrong . . . [and] set out to do something about it.” He described it a “second step in the revolution.”<sup>117</sup> Another journalist described the Columbia, Tennessee riots as illustrative of the

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<sup>115</sup> Gwendolyn Brooks, “the progress,” *The Essential Gwendolyn Brooks*, Elizabeth Alexander ed. (Chicago, IL: Literary Classics of the United States, 2005), 27.

<sup>116</sup> Gwendolyn Brooks, “The Anniad,” *Annie Allen* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1949), 23.

<sup>117</sup> Enoc P. Waters, Jr., “Bloodless Charleston Revolt,” *The Chicago Defender (National edition (1921-1967))*; Jun 15, 1946; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975), p. 13.

“revolutionary mood of the country.”<sup>118</sup> Revolutionized, they returned home and began to dismantle those delicate social arrangements Du Bois described.

In the postwar period, many black veterans could no longer sit still or endure the same oppression. Their experiences made acquiescence impossible. Although their transgressions and border crossings generally met with intense white backlash, failure, or even bodily harm, they provoked larger responses, both structural and within the national consciousness and memory. In their dress, words, and actions, black veterans pushed boundaries. When Etoy Fletcher attempted to vote, and then later showed up to testify against his assailants wearing military decorations, he directly challenged a system of white power, and for that whites punished him and attempted to stop and humiliate him in any way possible—first with physical violence, then discrediting him, emasculating him, and laughing at his demands for justice. Yet the white terror demonstrated that white Americans recognized a change in the nature of social relations. As black Americans, perhaps inadvertently in their own quests to obtain their individual due, worked to reshape collective memory and overstep established racial boundaries, white Americans, particularly in the South, became confused and angry. As one older white woman in Columbia, South Carolina observed as she stood in the same line as African Americans to cast a vote, “white folks are so confused they don’t know whether to ‘gee or haw.’”<sup>119</sup> With these small, early acts of resistance, black veterans in particular set the stage for the emergence of a more coherent civil rights movement in the 1950s. They demanded education, benefits, and civil rights. Sailor Bobby Wallace said of his military service, “we had to prove that we were who we

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<sup>118</sup> Agnes E. Meyer, “Columbia (Tenn.) Riot: Social and Economic Background,” *The Washington Post* (1923-1954); May 20, 1946; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Washington Post (1877-1997), p. 7.

<sup>119</sup> A.M. Rivera, Jr., “White Supremacy Rule Crumbling in Columbia; Negro Gains Stand Out,” *The Pittsburgh Courier* (1911-1950); May 29, 1948. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Pittsburgh Courier (1911-2002), p. 2.

said we were. That's what made me the man I am today. Don't tell me that I cannot do it. You just started a war."<sup>120</sup> While this early period demonstrated the limits to their actions as much as the possibilities, their efforts set larger shifts and responses in motion. As the black press repeated time and again in the years after the war, a crisis was on the horizon.

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<sup>120</sup> Bobby J. Wallace, interview by Holly Mott, not dated, audio recording. Bobby J. Wallace Collection (AFC/2001/001/4736), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. Washington, D.C.

Chapter 6  
Contesting Invisibility: Black Veterans Organize

16 September 1945

I have been giving some thought to my entering the membership of one of the various veteran organizations; however, I have not been able to reach a definite decision. . . . is there any organization you do not recommend? From a racial standpoint, where (or in what organization) do you think a Negro could make his best contribution as a veteran of World War II? I would hate to line up with a veteran body that was not dedicated to purpose of equal opportunities for the black veterans, as well as those of the other groups.<sup>1</sup>

Westley W. Law to Jesse O. Dedmon

In 1945, Staff Sergeant Westley Wallace Law wrote to the NAACP asking for guidance; he and his outfit, the 1880<sup>th</sup> Service Section, wanted to get involved. That month, the entire unit joined the organization. After the war, Law returned home to Georgia and used the G.I. Bill to complete his education at Georgia State College. He worked as a mail carrier for the next forty years. By 1950, Law had become the president of the Savannah branch of the NAACP and throughout his life he would work to advance black rights, desegregate public schools, and orchestrate a variety of other non-violent civil rights activities. The trajectory was not uncommon for black veterans.

As they reentered civilian society armed with the consciousness that impelled them to challenge the status quo, black veterans sought organized channels to create change. Wiley A.

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<sup>1</sup> Letter, Westley W. Law to Jesse O. Dedmon, 16 Sept 1945, folder 15 General Correspondence Sept Oct 1945, box II:G9; Part II Veterans Affairs File, 1940-1950; MS 34140 Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Branton, the first African American to complete law school at the University of Arkansas, immediately became active in his local branch of the NAACP in Arkansas upon his discharge in 1946. Branton later wrote that while overseas at Saipan and Okinawa, he was just as interested in the legal battles on the homefront as the U.S. war in the Pacific.<sup>2</sup> He engaged in voter registration activities and petitions to improve educational quality for African Americans.<sup>3</sup> When Hosea Williams left the hospital after a white mob beat him (while still in uniform) as he tried to drink from a white-only water fountain, he immediately joined the NAACP.<sup>4</sup> As they experienced discrimination, brutality, and war abroad, black veterans clamored for greater equality back home.

Chapter 5 examined the ways that individual veterans attacked the system and took a stand against injustice, refuting the idea of African-American inferiority. These veterans attempted to protect their own civil liberties through a range of actions, from attempting to obtain individual G.I. Bill benefits for education to reacting to white violence, aggression, or backlash. In this chapter, I consider the ways that black veterans functioned within civil rights organizations and formed their own groups, at times using their identities as veterans to advocate for power and equality. How did black veterans use their unique claims to citizenship to affect broad social changes in overtly political ways? Veterans had a tendency toward increasingly insistent, forceful, occasionally militant organizational tactics. As they joined existing

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<sup>2</sup> Wiley A. Branton, "Personal Memories of Thurgood Marshall," December, 1986, Wiley A. Branton Papers, Collection 187-1 to 187-18, box: Wiley A. Branton Papers Writings by Branton 187-11, folder 9: Writings by Branton—"Personal Memories of Thurgood Marshall," [December, 1986]; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>3</sup> Wiley A. Branton, interview by Steven Lawson, Oral History Office, October 1970, Washington, D.C. In Wiley A. Branton Papers, box Wiley A. Branton Papers Correspondence Writings by Branton 187-10, folder 27: Writings by Branton—"Eisenhower Administration," Oral History Research Office, Columbia University, 1973; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Wormser, "Hosea Williams: 1926-2000," in "The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow," *Public Broadcasting System*, 2002, accessed March 27, 2013, [http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/stories\\_people\\_will.html](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/stories_people_will.html).

organizations in large numbers, African-American veterans acted as precipitants to the movement. They had the ability to simultaneously be a part of communities and act as outside forces for change. Oftentimes, black veterans disagreed with old-guard activists, less inclined toward the more militant activism that the veterans brought to the table. To push even more insistently, black veterans also formed their own organizations to protect their specific veterans' interests. They used their identities as veterans and citizens to insist upon equal opportunity and civil rights. In some instances, this form of organizational activism backfired. As black veterans defended their rights as military veterans, white social, military, and political organizations pushed back. Each group battled to establish its own conception of the American veteran. Oftentimes, black veterans' organizations fell victim to allegations of communism, a device used to cripple the fledgling organizations, limit their effectiveness, and essentially call the citizenship of black Americans into question. Detractors used the Cold War language to camouflage racist ideology.

Despite many setbacks, veterans became the driving force in many civil rights activities in this immediate postwar period. They arrived home, joined organizations, and often organized local chapters of national associations. The veterans moved into leadership roles, forging networks throughout their communities, pressing a more forceful agenda than before, and adding a new, more militant flavor into the movement. Additional education from the benefits they ostensibly received from their service placed veterans in a unique position to shape the postwar country. Their experiences coupled with these opportunities had the potential to vault them into another economic and social class and provided the self-assurance of their mission and capabilities. Yet as society repeatedly questioned their status as veterans, refusing them the benefits that military service merited, it rendered their service invisible to an extent. In later

years, black veterans would be written out of the history of the war, and even now the years of invisibility are still being corrected.

Black veterans like Law and Branton joined a variety of civic organizations as they returned to civilian society. Established groups such as the NAACP, the Urban League, and the Southern Regional Council formed veterans' committees to educate black veterans and protect their interests. With groups like the American Legion still segregated, African-American veterans also developed their own organizations, or joined integrated groups like the American Veterans Committee (AVC) and participated in the group's many social justice campaigns. As Law indicated in his letter, he and many other black veterans preferred to join organizations focused on racial equality and civil rights. Political scientist Suzanne Mettler found that use of the G.I. Bill educational provisions increased civic participation in white veterans. While her data on black veterans proved less conclusive, small trends indicated that black veterans using these educational provisions might also have been more active in civic organizations.<sup>5</sup>

Government reports from the 1950s also suggest that World War II veterans pursued more specialized or advanced occupations than non-veterans, though it is unclear why.<sup>6</sup> As historians

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<sup>5</sup> Suzanne Mettler, *Soldiers to Citizens: The G.I. Bill and the Making of the Greatest Generation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 137; Suzanne Mettler, "Bringing the State Back In to Civic Engagement: Policy Feedback Effects of the G.I. Bill for World War II Veterans," in *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 96, No. 2, June 2002, 356-357. Mettler's data on black veterans is less reliable because she does not specify with her data sets whether it is advanced education or G.I. Bill financing of it that facilitated increased activism. Almost all the black veterans who obtained higher education postwar used the G.I. Bill. Essentially, it's unclear whether there is a significant difference using her approach with the G.I. Bill or if it was educated black veterans who were more politically active or educated black people in general. As Christopher Parker points out, political scientist Ronald Krebs in *Fighting for Rights: Military Service and the Politics of Citizenship* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006) expressed doubt that black veterans were more politically active than non-veterans. Parker argues that Krebs based his argument largely on anecdotal evidence, and that as forty four percent of black veterans did not use the G.I. Bill but as a whole remained more committed to activism than non veterans strengthens Parker's claim that military service was an important forecaster of political involvement. Christopher S. Parker, *Fighting for Democracy: Black Veterans and the Struggle Against White Supremacy in the Postwar South* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 195.

<sup>6</sup> Mettler, *Soldiers to Citizens*, 92.

like David Onkst and Ira Katznelson point out, local administration of these programs limited the extent to which African Americans could take advantage of the benefits. Yet it is possible to conclude that the G.I. Bill extended opportunities for many African-American veterans, particularly in the realm of education. These programs expanded the black middle class, increasing the pool of African Americans in professions such as medicine or law. Prior to this, clergymen and educators had dominated the black professional classes.<sup>7</sup> The group did not become a majority, and as Onkst noted, African Americans did not experience a large-scale socioeconomic shift during this period because of the G.I. Bill. Yet black veterans did possess greater mobility, and the ability to move into leadership roles in a variety of civil organizations following the war. This likely denotes a combination of Mettler and Parker's arguments: that the combination of G.I. Bill educational benefits and a consciousness of citizenship entitlements veterans gained from military service led to greater civic involvement. Black veterans struggled to obtain these G.I. Benefits, especially in the South. Accordingly, the attainment of higher education in the postwar period and insistence on access to these benefits in and of itself constituted a challenge to white authority and the social hierarchy in place. Once veterans obtained that education, they became involved in civic organizations in great numbers. In effect, they engaged in that struggle by demanding the same educational opportunities as white veterans.

Political science studies also indicate that veterans performed at higher levels in colleges and universities, potentially because of factors like age.<sup>8</sup> Veterans used their educational achievements and increasingly entered professional fields such as law and medicine. As

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<sup>7</sup> Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), 116, 120.

<sup>8</sup> Mettler, *Soldiers to Citizens*, 71.

President Lyndon Johnson later said, they expanded the black professional class: a stable and growing black bourgeoisie. It is clear that in this postwar period veterans took a leading role in economic and social advancement for African Americans.<sup>9</sup> Katznelson also points out, however, that it is important to keep in mind that while education expanded the black middle class, it also widened the racial achievement gap because African-American veterans in general had much less access to G.I. Bill benefits than white veterans, especially in the South. I argue, however, that while broadly speaking the effects of educational provisions of the G.I. Bill were limited and while there may not have been an overall significant socioeconomic shift for African Americans, the expanding pool of black bourgeoisie acted as a precipitant for revolutionary change.

Groups like the NAACP always played a decisive role in mobilizing the black community and orchestrating a variety of legal battles. Histories of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People are limited. Historians avoided the topic for a long time because the organization had a reputation as elitist. Secretary Walter White and Assistant Secretary Roy Wilkins, reputed to be conservative and bureaucratic in outlook, personified these characteristics.<sup>10</sup> In many respects these same characteristics came under fire as growing numbers of black veterans joined the organization in the postwar period. Yet throughout the war, the NAACP developed an important relationship with servicemen, prioritizing the incorporation of black veterans into the organization. In December 1944 the NAACP established a Veterans Affairs Department in order to address the influx of inquiries and complaints from

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<sup>9</sup> Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White*, 120.

<sup>10</sup> Kevern Verney, *The Debate on Black Civil Rights in America* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2006), 67-68. Verney notes that the NAACP has received limited coverage, especially considering how influential the organization was. Robert Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching, 1909-1950* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1980) looked at major campaigns in the 1940s. Mark Tushnet, *The NAACP's Legal Strategy Against Segregated Education, 1925-1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004) looked at legal work of the NAACP and Thurgood Marshall. While there are a number of other studies, Verney argues that considering the importance and influence of the organization, this is not a particularly comprehensive coverage.

black servicemen. In addition, the NAACP had received generous financial contributions from members of the armed forces, at home and in all theaters of operation. The department soon evolved into a political lobby and a means to inform African American veterans of their rights. Jesse O. Dedmon, a World War I Army veteran who had risen to the rank of captain, headed the department. Dedmon graduated from Howard Law School in the 1930's, and before his discharge from the Army he served as a trial judge advocate at Camp Claiborne, Louisiana. As the Association's Secretary of Veterans' Affairs, Dedmon monitored any legislation with the potential to affect black veterans or servicemen and kept other departments in the NAACP informed.<sup>11</sup> The committee looked out for the interests of African-American servicemen, investigating complaints and reports of maltreatment or discrimination during and after the war. As government officials like Civilian Aide to the Secretary of War Truman K. Gibson fell into the bad graces of the black community and servicemen, the NAACP built up a rapport. Walter White spent much of his time during the war touring military installations in different parts of the United States and around the world to ensure that the military complied with non-discrimination regulations, and the NAACP defended black troops in a variety of disciplinary issues or reports of discrimination where they felt they could make a credible case. Both during and after the war, the NAACP's political clout and concern for the wellbeing of black veterans made it a logical choice for activism.

Dedmon and the Veterans Affairs Committee worked to establish local veterans' affairs committees to address problems black veterans faced as they returned to civilian life. The

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<sup>11</sup> Eric Gallagher, "A Guide to the Microfilm Edition of Papers of the NAACP: Part9. Discrimination in the U.S. Armed Forces, 1918-1955, Series C: The Veterans Affairs Committee, 1940-1950," ed. John H. Bracey, Jr., and August Meier, (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 1989), xix; Letter, Jesse O. Dedmon to branch veterans committees, 15 Feb 1945, folder 1 Branch Veterans Committees by States "A"- "G" 1945-1948, box II:G1; MS 34140 Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

committees worked to eliminate further discrimination in the armed forces and toward the integration of the military. They also provided information for African American veterans and their dependents on the rights and benefits at both the federal and state levels. Committees labored to ensure fair practices in Veterans Administration (VA) facilities and employment and eliminate racially separate VA facilities. Lastly, the committees sought to mobilize black veterans in the fight for civil rights.<sup>12</sup> The local veterans committees acted as important facets of the program for the national veterans committee, but also for local NAACP branches, expanded by these veterans' organizations. As Captain William Robert (Bob) Ming, later one of the architects of the *Brown v. The Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* case that made school segregation illegal, wrote to Dedmon, the greatest problems veterans faced were re-employment and securing their rights under the G.I. Bill. With the VA set up as it was, both of these problems depended upon action at the local level, and the NAACP Veterans Affairs Committee needed to orchestrate effective local campaigns to achieve the desired ends. Ming suggested that the most effective way to solve veterans' problems would be to place veterans themselves in charge of these local committees, "It would be a terrible mistake to assemble the usual group of 4-F's and phoney 2-B's to solve veterans problems, not that the veterans will mind," wrote Ming. "They [the veterans] simply won't pay attention to them."<sup>13</sup>

Dedmon had advocated much the same earlier that year. As he worked with local NAACP branches to establish veterans committees, he advised that as far as possible, local branches should incorporate veterans to ensure that veterans had access to aid as they

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<sup>12</sup> Jesse O. Dedmon, "NAACP Manual For Veterans' Committee," not dated, folder 1 Branch Veterans Committees by States "A"- "G" 1945-1948, box II:G1; MS 34140 Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>13</sup> Letter, Robert William Ming to Jessee O. Dedmon, Jr., 2 Oct 1945, folder 15 General Correspondence, Sept Oct 1945, box II:G9; MS 34140 Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

transitioned back into civilian life.<sup>14</sup> With this in mind, branches generally elected veterans to head the veterans' affairs committees, which in turn worked with Dedmon to provide statistics and help the NAACP monitor organizations like the VA at a local level. Not only did black veterans move into leadership positions in those committees, but as they obtained additional education in the immediate postwar period, they often ended up heading entire local branches of the organization and working fervently to establish new branches.

As veteran Charles Evers expressed it, the NAACP was the only civil rights organization with which both he and his brother were familiar. In addition, national leaders like Roy Wilkins had started reaching out to veterans in a variety of southern locales, and men like the Evers brothers, to establish a stronger organizational presence in places like Mississippi.<sup>15</sup> For veterans returning home who wanted to be involved in civil rights activities, the NAACP generally became their first stop. In later years, local NAACP leaders encountered problems with a rigid organizational bureaucracy. With heightened political activity in the 1960s, other civil rights organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee or the Southern Christian Leadership Council emerged and tried to exert influence in specific areas throughout the South. As local leaders attempted to work with these organizations and form coalitions, the NAACP national leadership often resisted this participation.<sup>16</sup> In the first decade after the war, however, the NAACP remained the primary organization for civil rights activity, and consequently the one that most black veterans opted to join.

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<sup>14</sup> Letter, Jesse O. Dedmon to branch veterans committees, 15 Feb 1945, folder 1 Branch Veterans Committees by States "A"- "G" 1945-1948, box II:G1; MS 34140 Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Evers, *Have No Fear* (New York: J. Wiley & Sons, 1997), 83.

<sup>16</sup> Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 61.

Aaron Henry served in the Army for three years, 1943-1946. As a soldier, he regularly became involved in local NAACP branches. In Alabama, Los Angeles, and Honolulu, Henry sought them out. He discovered that while individual black soldiers might hesitate to speak out about racial injustice on military installations, they were often willing to allow NAACP representatives to speak for them.<sup>17</sup> When he left the Army, Henry used the G.I. Bill to attend Xavier University in New Orleans, maintaining his ties to the NAACP.<sup>18</sup> He would graduate from Xavier with a degree in pharmacology, marry, and move home to Clarksdale, Mississippi to open a drugstore. Shortly after his return to Mississippi, an incident occurred in Clarksdale that led Henry to become more involved in the organization. Two white men forced two young black women (ages 17 and 19) into a car at gunpoint, drove to a remote section of town and then raped the women. When the young women made their way home, their parents notified the police, who arrested the perpetrators. Only a week later, a court found the two white men not guilty and set them free. The men argued that the sex had been consensual. Henry took a personal interest in the matter, as a friend of one of the victim's brothers. It made him realize, Henry later wrote, that African Americans in Clarksdale needed greater legal protection. The next time a local voting organization met, Henry and some others decided to organize a local NAACP branch.

He contacted the regional director and worked to organize a Clarksdale branch, and in 1952 became president of the Coahoma Country NAACP. Over the next couple of years, Henry and the Coahoma branch focused on recruitment and pressing causes such as school integration. They also established financial contingency plans for African Americans who had been blackballed for participating in civil rights organizations. Farmers comprised much of the local

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<sup>17</sup> Aaron Henry and Constance Curry, *Aaron Henry: The Fire Ever Burning* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), 63.

<sup>18</sup> Aaron Henry, interview by T.H. Baker, September 12, 1970, (web) transcript, p. 1. Accession Number 78-108. Lyndon B. Johnson Library Oral History Collection, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, Texas.

population, and many found that increased political activity, especially civil rights campaigns, meant economic sanctions and other repercussions. Henry and the NAACP established the Friendship Federal Credit Union to assist farm families who ran into trouble for their political involvement.<sup>19</sup>

Aaron Henry quickly began a career and rose to prominence as a civil rights leader. He would serve as president of the Mississippi State NAACP for thirty years. Henry later admitted that, “I doubt really if I would have ever got to college had it not been for the fact that I’d gone to the Second World War and came out of the war . . . and used the GI Bill as a financing agent that took care of tuition and the other incidentals of college.”<sup>20</sup> Henry also attributed part of his tenacity in remaining in Mississippi to this education. He felt that as he had been fortunate enough to obtain an education in spite of his poor background as the son of a tenant farmer, he had an obligation to remain in the area and try to assist people who did not have the same advantages.<sup>21</sup> Under the separate but equal doctrine, whites kept blacks in a subordinate, semi-literate state; “ignorant of how other people lived, they prevented us from believing that change was possible. To a large degree, it was outside forces that brought the change—we had so few tools to do it ourselves.”<sup>22</sup> Aided and abetted by organizations like the NAACP, black veterans became one of those outside forces when they served, saw different parts of the world, acquired more education and returned home to educate and uplift others.

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<sup>19</sup> Dr. Aaron Henry, interview by Neil McMillen and George Burson, May 1, 1972, transcript, p. 8, University of Southern Mississippi Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>21</sup> Aaron Henry, interview by Jack Bass, April 2, 1974, transcript, p. 23, A-0107, Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007), Documenting the American South, Oral Histories of the American South, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

<sup>22</sup> Henry and Curry, *Aaron Henry*, 83-84.

Henry described Medgar Evers as one of the most dedicated members of their local NAACP branch. The Evers brothers, Charles and Medgar, arrived home in 1945 from the Pacific and France respectively. In 1946 the pair enrolled at Alcorn Agricultural & Mechanical College using the G.I. Bill to finance their tuition, first earning high school diplomas and then college. Charles Evers recalled that there were a few veterans at the college. Most of the students were “country boys,” just trying to get enough schooling to become teachers to earn forty dollars a month. “Medgar and I held ourselves above these country boys,” wrote Charles Evers. “We came from a stronger family than they did, we were older and had served overseas in the war. We had more guts.”<sup>23</sup> The Evers brother joined the NAACP after the war, and stepped up their involvement in the early 1950s.

While Charles Evers deprecatingly referred to the non-veteran students as “country boys,” his description touched upon an important distinction. The young people enrolled at Alcorn looked for some education just to get by, to make a living to survive. Black veterans not only had the means for additional education under the G.I. Bill, vaulting them into a black middle class, but they had the mettle and drive to insist upon other forms of equal treatment. Aaron Henry explained that oftentimes civil rights leaders had to convince black Mississippians to start challenging the status quo, that prior to this many African Americans accepted segregation rather than question the system and “gamble with reprisals.” After all, wrote Henry, “How many men with ten children and a forty-dollar weekly pay check can afford to lose their jobs over a principle?” As he said, until people independent of the system helped fashion the movement and opposition, there was little effective organization for change.<sup>24</sup> The black

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<sup>23</sup> Charles Evers and Andrew Szanton, *Have No Fear: The Charles Evers Story* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1997), 56.

<sup>24</sup> Henry and Curry, *Aaron Henry*, 78-79, 84.

veterans, while born into the system, learned otherwise, gained the tools necessary for opposition, and effectively re-infiltrated southern black communities in the postwar period to start agitating for change.

The Evers brothers diverged in a number of respects: Medgar Evers spent much of his time studying, already interested in civil rights struggles and politics, while only money and money initially held Charles' interest.<sup>25</sup> Charles judged that they became true "agitators" after college, working closely with the NAACP in 1952. At that point, he remembered, "I started sleeping with a gun under my head." Medgar established a NAACP branch in Cleveland, Mississippi and revived an old unit in Mound Bayou. As he drove through Mississippi selling life insurance and establishing civil rights organizations, he found he could not use the restrooms at many of the service stations, and he began a campaign to get African Americans to refuse to buy gas where they could not use the restroom.<sup>26</sup> In 1954, Medgar became Mississippi's first NAACP Field Secretary. The position held real implications for the movement in Mississippi. He filed the first lawsuit against the University of Mississippi Law School that same year. The next year, when fourteen year old Emmett Till's body surfaced in a river, Evers worked tirelessly to shine the national spotlight on the case. Evers, Amzie Moore, Aaron Henry, and Ruby Hurley (the NAACP director for the Southeast Regional Office) moved discreetly around the Delta, disguised as farm workers as they tried to convince locals to speak out about the Till case, finally getting Mose Wright to testify. Whites harassed and threatened them as they worked toward their goals. The NAACP organization operated at the national level with a number of broader goals in mind. On the local level, the members took care of little things such as helping African-

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<sup>25</sup> Evers and Szanton, *Have No Fear*, 58.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 73.

American people in the community survive, while the Evers brothers worked non-stop to ensure the wellbeing of people in their area.<sup>27</sup>

Even veterans without that access to a formally educated black middle class became involved in civil rights activism. Plenty of non-college educated black veterans played important roles in the struggle as well, though as historian Charles Payne noted, the black community paid a price for class snobbery.<sup>28</sup> It is also possible that World War II veterans came from slightly higher educational backgrounds than some other African Americans, considering they had to pass a test to be inducted into the military.<sup>29</sup> While the majority of African Americans placed into the lowest categories on the Army General Classification Test, the military also rejected many who could not pass the test at all. Mississippian Amzie Moore spent his service in the U.S. Army in the China-Burma-India Theater and underwent profound changes as a result of his time abroad. Moore returned to work in the post office following the war and never used the G.I. Bill for higher education. He later opened a gas station and grocery store in Cleveland, Mississippi. Moore eventually became the president of the Cleveland, Mississippi NAACP. Under his leadership and that of Medgar Evers, the branch grew to the second largest chapter in the state. Like many other politically active African Americans, Moore generally carried a weapon. He kept weapons in his home and the area around the house well-lit. Like many of that generation of activists, Moore made his mark on the movement as a community organizer, through his willingness to cooperate with other organizations and the emerging younger generation of activists. At the request of NAACP's Ella Baker, Moore would educate men like Robert Moses

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 82-83, 86-87.

<sup>28</sup> Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 185. Payne used the example of Robert Burns, a veteran with a great deal to give back to the black community but who remained relatively withdrawn because he was embarrassed by a lack of formal schooling.

<sup>29</sup> Mettler, *Soldiers to Citizens*, 92.

about the movement in Mississippi in the early 1960s. He provided Moses with access to local people in the networks that Moore and the earlier generation of leadership had created; what historian Charles Payne termed, “cooptable networks.” These linked activists together allowing them to communicate and mobilize resources. When the younger activists entered the Delta region in the 1960s, they found that the older generation had already established support networks ready to mobilize the movement in critical moments.<sup>30</sup>

With the leadership of veterans like Moore, Evers, Henry, and E.J. Stringer (a veteran and dentist who served as president of the state conference of NAACP branches in 1955), the NAACP grew substantially compared to its prewar numbers in Mississippi and other regions in the decade immediately following World War II. Not until the resurgence of white violence in 1955 after the *Brown* case and the emergence of White Citizens Councils, did membership begin experiencing steep declines. The new veteran leaders brought a different understanding of how to conduct their organizations. Local NAACP leaders consistently faulted the national organization’s stance on non-violence. As NAACP administrator Ruby Hurley once noted of Medgar Evers, “He was anything but non-violent.” Evers carried a rifle in his trunk and had guns all over his home. His wife, Myrlie even had a gun in her nightstand. Hurley observed that the NAACP had to go to great lengths to re-educate him; Evers tended to be more confrontational than the typical NAACP field officer. Historian Charles Payne argued that much of the collective leadership in Mississippi only survived because they took the right of armed self-defense for granted.<sup>31</sup>

Drafted in 1944, Robert F. Williams of North Carolina served in the Army and later in the Marine Corps. Racial segregation in the military angered Williams, but he felt that military

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<sup>30</sup> Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 31, 44, 105, 141, 188.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 49-51.

service gave him and many other African-American veterans a feeling of self assurance and security. “The Army indoctrination instilled in us what a virtue it was to fight for democracy and that we were fighting for democracy and upholding the Constitution,” said Williams. “But most of all they taught us to use arms.”<sup>32</sup> Williams returned home to Monroe, North Carolina in 1955 after his discharge from the Marine Corps. Race relations in Monroe had escalated with the *Brown* decision the year before. Williams felt that in that area, the NAACP had made little effort to organize lower-class workers, and that the leadership consisted solely of black professionals and bourgeoisie. Lacking another viable civil rights organization, Williams became involved and revived the defunct local chapter. He prioritized recruitment among those African Americans whom he viewed as the most oppressed and exploited. Williams explained to local African Americans that he wanted to rebuild the chapter with “fighters,” and that he planned to “give the white bigots hell.” As he worked to revive the chapter, working-class African Americans began to fill the ranks. “All appointed officers were young in comparison to the previous leaders and they were all veterans,” wrote Williams. A young doctor, Albert E. Perry, Jr. attended medical school on the G.I. Bill and became the chapter vice president.<sup>33</sup> In later years, the NAACP’s Roy Wilkins had Williams removed from the organization because of his open advocacy of armed self-defense. A court in Monroe, North Carolina, dismissed a case against a white man who had beaten a pregnant black woman. Prior to the incident, Williams revealed that he had attempted to keep the local organization from resorting to violence. That day in court, Williams proclaimed, “I say to the world that from this day forward we will meet

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<sup>32</sup> Timothy B. Tyson, “Robert F. Williams, “Black Power,” and the Roots of the African American Freedom Struggle,” *The Journal of American History* 85, no. 2 (1998), 548.

<sup>33</sup> Robert F. Williams, “Freedom Struggle in the Free World,” p. 3-12, folder: Manuscript Articles by Williams, 1961-1962, Robert F. Williams Papers, Call Number 85506 Aa 2, Reel 5, Group 1 Series 2: Manuscripts and Writings, 1961-1970. Michigan Historical Collections, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

violence with violence. That we will become our own judges, our own juries and our own execution. And if it requires lynching to stop lynching then we ought to be willing to resort to that.” Shortly thereafter, the NAACP demanded that he publically rescind the statement, and released Williams in 1959.<sup>34</sup>

Although Williams’ experience occurred in the late 1950s, it illustrated the growing ideological disagreements between veterans and the organizations, and veterans’ willingness to resort to armed self-defense. Williams represented a more extreme example of armed militancy, but even men like Medgar Evers toyed with the idea of guerilla warfare with whites in the South. Evers’ close study of the Mau Mau Rebellion in Kenya, and Jomo Kenyatta, contributed to his contemplation of revolutionary violence to combat white supremacy. He never believed that African Americans could win a guerilla war in the Delta, but thought that such a campaign might bring national attention to the injustices taking place in Mississippi.<sup>35</sup> While he ultimately gave up the idea, he never advocated nonviolence.<sup>36</sup> Historian Simon Wendt argued that armed resistance supplemented the non-violent protests in the 1950s and 1960s. While nonviolence might have driven social change in the South, armed resistance often enhanced the effectiveness of the campaigns, particularly at the local level.

The extent of the nonviolent movement has also been somewhat misrepresented. Even Martin Luther King owned weapons and had black armed guards at his home. As activist Bayard Rustin pointed out, the 1950s saw considerable debate as to whether violence was

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<sup>34</sup> Robert F. Williams, interview with Gilbert Edward Noble, November 10, 1991, radio transcript, folder: Radio Transcript, “Like It Is,” November 10, 1991, Robert F. Williams Papers, Call Number 85506 Aa 2, Reel 25, Group 2 Series 9: Press Releases and Publicity, 1963-1985. Michigan Historical Collections, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

<sup>35</sup> Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 49; Myrlie Evers-Williams and Manning Marable, ed. *The Autobiography of Medgar Evers*, 11.

<sup>36</sup> Evers-Williams and Marable, *The Autobiography of Medgar Evers*, 11.

justifiable in defense or retaliation. Armed resistance was not a new concept, however. Some black activists had advocated militant activism as early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells critiqued black masculinity in some of her writings, arguing that only self-determination and armed self-defense would deter white terrorism. Yet very few African Americans had the means or know-how to put these militant ideas into action.<sup>37</sup>

As Robert F. Williams had explained, military experience provided many black veterans with an understanding of arms and the will to defend themselves. Black veterans, like the Crook brothers in Mississippi who turned their family's home into a battleground when they refused to bow to white intimidation, were armed and willing to fight back if pushed or threatened. While oftentimes they did little more than carry arms, as in Medgar Evers' case, their insistence upon the right to protect themselves with violence sent a powerful message, and one that deeply disturbed whites. In 1954 the Mississippi legislature frequently discussed what it viewed as an alarming trend in African American acquisition of guns and ammunition.<sup>38</sup> Black veterans asserted a militant, masculine rhetoric upon their return to civilian life. Veteran A.Z. Young returned to Bogalusa, Louisiana and helped found the Deacons for Defense and Justice in the 1960s, a black self-defense organization to combat Klan activities.<sup>39</sup> Aaron Henry owned a gun and openly displayed it in the 1960s after his house was firebombed. When local law enforcement confiscated his weapon, Henry complained that, as the authorities could not provide

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<sup>37</sup> Simon Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun: Armed Resistance and the Struggle for Civil Rights*, (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2007), 1-2, 11-12, 24.

<sup>38</sup> Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 44.

<sup>39</sup> Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun*, 17.

a policeman for guard duty, he should be able to protect his family and property.<sup>40</sup> Charles Evers, in addition to the .38 he kept in his pocket, carried a long switchblade because he found that “whites are scared of blacks with knives—they hate those knives worse than guns.”<sup>41</sup> Historian Annelieke Dirks revealed that many activists did not view the movement for armed self-defense as necessary until the late 1960s. Yet this does not indicate that the civil rights struggles in the immediate postwar years and in the 1950s had a nonviolent character. Rather, civil rights organizations like the NAACP managed to keep armed black resistance out of the national spotlight until later.<sup>42</sup>

Like Ida B. Wells, these armed black veterans also expressed dissatisfaction with other African Americans fearful of incurring white retaliation. In the early 1950s, Aaron Henry shamed a man into taking legal action to obtain justice after a white man raped the man’s daughter. “It was almost more than I could bear when he told us, ‘We don’t want any trouble,’” Henry later fretted. He stood up and politely told the man that “if you were my father and this had happened to me and you stood there and talked about trouble, I would disown you.”<sup>43</sup> Likewise, Medgar Evers, generally a patient man, lost his head when an African American man, fearing economic reprisal, refused to file charges against a white man who raped his girlfriend. Both of the Evers brothers expressed contempt for timidity among African Americans.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Annelieke Dirks, “Between Threat and Reality: The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Emergence of Armed Self-Defense in Clarksdale and Natchez, Mississippi, 1960-1965, in *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 1, no. 1. (2006): 71-98, p. 71.

<sup>41</sup> Charles Evers, *Evers* ed. Grace Halsell (New York: World Pub. Co., 1971), 93.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 73-74.

<sup>43</sup> Henry and Curry, *Aaron Henry*, 72.

<sup>44</sup> Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 52.

Economic reprisals constituted a very real threat. As Aaron Henry observed, people living in extreme poverty could hardly afford to lose their jobs over a principle. Whites in the area habitually blackballed politically active African Americans, and Henry's NAACP branch worked to counter this by providing economic contingency plans for black activists under financial duress. The veteran leadership so prominent in local NAACP chapters built up branches throughout the South in the years immediately following the war. Local Mississippi NAACP branches grew by fifty percent in the years before 1955. Their organizational networks under the auspices of the NAACP allowed them to support politically active African Americans in various locales when whites conducted campaigns of economic oppression. In 1951, Dr. T.R.M. Howard, a wealthy civil rights leader in Mississippi, founded the Regional Council of Negro Leadership (RCNL) with Amzie Moore, Medgar Evers, and Aaron Henry. The organization functioned something like a local NAACP, though originally intended as less of a civil rights organization and more a method of giving voice to black economic and social concerns in the Delta.<sup>45</sup>

Amzie Moore experienced this economic crackdown himself in the 1950s. White Citizens Councils produced a great deal of economic pressure on black Mississippians. They foreclosed on mortgages and loans, denied credit, and refused employment to African Americans.<sup>46</sup> Moore, a long time postal employee and owner of a service station, had overextended himself with the service station, and banks refused to advance him any additional credit. The Post Office reduced his hours, and the banks demanded that Moore pay his mortgage

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<sup>45</sup> Henry and Curry, *Aaron Henry*, 80.

<sup>46</sup>“NAACP Strikes Back in Miss. Economic Battle,” *The Chicago Defender (National edition)* (1921-1967); Jan 1, 1955. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975), p. 2.

in full or risk foreclosure.<sup>47</sup> Charles Evers likewise felt this economic crackdown. As he worked to get African Americans in Mississippi to pay the poll taxes, he found that whites denied him lease renewals, demanded that the local radio station fire him, purchased his interests in a business venture, and bribed his employees into quitting his employ. Local NAACP branches assisted African Americans caught up in these economic traps.<sup>48</sup> Using the networks that these local leaders had created, the national organization raised funds, obtained the support of other organizations, and sent aid to black leaders in Mississippi to defray the economic pressures.<sup>49</sup> Other organizations like the RCNL also worked to meet the economic challenges facing African Americans involved in civil rights activities. Entry into a black middle class allowed men like Medgar Evers to effectively conduct community organizing campaigns because unlike those on the lowest rung of the economic scale, he did not have to worry as much about basic subsistence. The veterans not only had the means to take part in these organizations, but the drive, the fearlessness, and at times the martial training necessary to organize and strike back against abusive white tactics. In turn, these networks the veterans created provided a support system, connecting local branches with the national organization. They could continue their activism at the local level, and the veterans acted as liaisons with the higher levels of the organization.

A number of civil rights organizations formed and evolved in the 1940s. In the South, the Southern Regional Council (SRC) played a prominent role in organizing southern activists. Formed from the Commission on Interracial Cooperation in 1944, the SRC established a

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<sup>47</sup> Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 45.

<sup>48</sup> Medgar Evers, "Report of Mr. Medgar W. Evers, Mississippi Field Secretary in "Memorandum to Mr. Wilkins from Mr. Current," 13 Dec 1954, ed. Myrlie Evers-Williams & Manning Marable, *The Autobiography of Medgar Evers*, 22-24.

<sup>49</sup> "NAACP Strikes Back in Miss. Economic Battle," *The Chicago Defender (National edition)* (1921-1967); Jan 1, 1955. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975), p. 2; Letter, Roy Wilkins to Medgar Evers, 21 Dec 1955, ed. Myrlie Evers-Williams & Manning Marable, *The Autobiography of Medgar Evers*, 43-44.

Veteran's Service Project that same year. A white economist, Dr. George S. Mitchell, initially headed the SRC, and the group worked to protect veterans' interests, educate veterans about benefits and rights in the postwar period, and monitor local administration of the G.I. Bill. The group had its hands full trying to obtain a fair deal for black veterans. Within the Veteran's Service Project, the SRC employed a group of eight African-American veterans, tasking them with opening up education and training opportunities for others in the South, educating veterans on benefits, and report on the relationships between local Veterans Administration (VA) offices and black veterans.<sup>50</sup> One of the SRC staff, Vincent Malveaux, had served in Europe and participated in the Fifth Platoon Project: integrating black rifle platoons into white companies in 1944 and 1945. Malveaux had relinquished his rank as a non-commissioned officer to serve in an infantry platoon.<sup>51</sup> Toward the end of the war, when the Army moved these African-American volunteers back into service units, Malveaux and four other black soldiers wrote directly to General Eisenhower protesting the treatment.<sup>52</sup>

After the war, already in possession of a law degree, Malveaux conducted surveys and research for the SRC and the American Council on Race Relations. He traveled the country and reported on readjustment conditions for minority veterans, from job placement to educational access. His reports detailed the rampant discrimination, lack of regulation for local administrations, and minorities generally uninformed about the benefits they could receive. For one study, Malveaux visited twenty-one cities across the United States to report on the status of

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<sup>50</sup> Letter, George S. Mitchell to the Honorable Helen Gahagan Douglas, 28 May 1946, in the Southern Regional Council Papers, 1944-1968, Series VII: Veteran's Service Project 1944-1951, Reel 189, VII: 22. The Southern Regional Council Papers, 1944-1968, microfilm.

<sup>51</sup> "5 black WWII vets honored," in the *Reading Eagle*, 25 July, 1998. (accessed April 7, 2013) <<http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1955&dat=19980724&id=YA4vAAAAIBAJ&sjid=LaYFAAAAIBAJ&pg=1096,5000840>>.

<sup>52</sup> "Four Sergeants Take Gripe Directly to Eisenhower," *The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967)*; Oct 27, 1945. ProQuest Historical newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975), p. 10.

returning minority veterans: from El Paso, Texas, to San Francisco, California, to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.<sup>53</sup> Malveaux described the ways the local administration of the U.S. Employment Services Agencies (USES), relegated African Americans to menial jobs, and referred them for unemployment benefits to maintain segregation, rather than placing qualified African Americans in positions that crossed social boundaries. He also discovered an overall lack of facilities and services for minority veterans. Phoenix, Arizona declined to establish any veterans' services facilities at all, with the rationale, "Only the Mexicans will use it." Even in New York City and Chicago, the USES offices did not employ any black counselors, problematic in places with large populations of minorities because these counselors lacked the knowledge (and often the will) to advise minority veterans. An interviewer at the USES offices in Minnesota noted that there were plenty of job opportunities, and lots of qualified African Americans. Yet the office declined to send any of the black applicants to these firms.<sup>54</sup>

As the black press noted, Malveaux's investigation revealed similar levels of discrimination from veteran information and employment centers in the North. Particularly in large cities, discriminatory administrations inhibited the ability of minorities to receive information and benefits. While the main problem of northern veterans' centers was generally their lack of black counselors, these northern cities still tended to place African Americans in menial jobs like window washing.<sup>55</sup> Shortly after Malveaux's report of conditions for black veterans, the American Council on Race Relations organized a national emergency conference to

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<sup>53</sup> Vincent Malveaux, American Council on Race Relations, "Summary: Survey of Community Veteran Information Center," 29 March 1946, p. 1, in the Southern Regional Council Papers, 1944-1968, Series VII: Veteran's Service Project 1944-1951, Reel 189, VII: 29. The Southern Regional Council Papers, 1944-1968, microfilm.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, p. 4-5.

<sup>55</sup> "Survey Shows Vet Aid Centers Differ Greatly: Segregation Rife in Some Northern Cities; Houston Center Viewed as Model for South," *Afro-American (1893-1988)*; Mar 16, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Baltimore Afro-American (1893-1988), p. 9.

investigate and take action on behalf of minority veterans. A host of minority interest organizations came together, such as the Urban League, the Japanese American Citizens' League, the Southern Regional Council, and the NAACP, seeking action.<sup>56</sup>

Other veterans traveled throughout the South for the SRC as well, reporting much the same as Malveaux, and working to inform local populations about the availability of vocational programs for veterans. Horace Bohannon, an Atlanta native who served as a flight officer, did a great deal of work in Georgia. He cooperated with a variety of local veterans organizations to correct some of the deplorable conditions around the state. Bohannon built good connections in and around Atlanta especially. He sometimes had connections to the local black administrators through friends and family, allowing him to get more in depth feedback. In this area, residents seemed to fear that the veterans would not remain in Georgia because of the lack of advancement and opportunity. In areas where black veterans received especially short shrift, like Savannah, Georgia, Bohannon not only consulted with local leaders about how to improve upon existing conditions, but he put together a Citizens Committee to advocate for better opportunities for job training in the city. He organized panels, meetings, and councils creating a foundation that black community organizers could build upon to advocate for greater access to benefits for the veterans. Bohannon also worked with local leaders completely unaffiliated with these veterans programs. In a Tennessee town, he obtained the cooperation of the black Baptist preacher with a very large congregation. While the pastor had never heard of the vocational training programs, he worked to spread the word to his congregation and to organize the local black veterans'

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<sup>56</sup> "Council to Study Vet's Problems: Charges Bias in Aid Under GI Bill of Rights," *Afro-American (1893-1988)*; Mar 30, 1946; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Baltimore Afro-American 1893-1988), p. 7.

program administrators into groups to work on a more concrete program to educate black veterans.<sup>57</sup>

Bohannon and the other SRC veterans moving throughout the south to promote vocational educational services and veterans taking advantage of G.I. Bill benefits demonstrate some important trends. First, these veterans worked to create community networks, organized for the specific purpose of providing additional upward economic mobility for black veterans. These individuals often drew on community figures like clergy or teachers to spread the word about availability of benefits. The community then mobilized to push for greater access to educational programs on behalf of their local veterans. Not only did the returned veterans symbolize potential access to greater citizenship for the black community through their military participation, but they theoretically had the potential to obtain education, jump to a higher socioeconomic status, and later effectively advocate for others. Local African-American communities often had the veterans' best interests in mind. The prospect of a large group of African Americans obtaining additional education and greater economic mobility had a potential to initiate change that these local communities recognized.

Second, these SRC veterans moved through the South and set up a series of local networks, much like their NAACP counterparts. Admittedly, with a small number of veterans working at the SRC, the organizational networks had less clout and organizational importance in the long run than those from local NAACP branches, organized by veterans who remained in one area and built up networks over a number of years. Yet the SRC realized that some 600,000 black veterans were returning to the thirteen southern states. Many of these men were ambitious, mature, and would soon become some of the most active leaders in the region. By setting up

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<sup>57</sup> Horace Bohannon, "Excerpts, Weekly reports," from 7 Jan 1946-5 May 1946, p. 1-8, in The Southern Regional Council Papers, 1944-1968, Series VII: Veteran's Service Project, 1944-1951, Reel 189, VII: 29. The Southern Regional Council Papers, 1944-1968, microfilm.

networks, supporting these black veterans, educating them about the available resources and advocating for access to these resources on their behalf, the SRC reasoned that they could help mold a group of responsible citizens with a great deal of civic ambition to emerge as black leaders. The SRC prioritized providing veterans with access to education and training, and then finding them more appropriate employment than local USES administrators generally did.<sup>58</sup>

Veterans in these major civil rights groups in the 1940s and early 1950s acted as forces both inside and outside of their communities. In addition to which, they now had greater tools and resources available to become forces for change. W.E.B. Du Bois wrote a story in 1903 about a young man who left his small Georgia town for school in the North. “The white folk of Altamaha voted John a good boy. . . . But they shook their heads when his mother wanted to send him off to school.” Half the black community followed John to the train station to see him off. After seven years in the North, John finished preparatory school and then college, transformed into a tall, grave man. “He grew slowly to feel almost for the first time the Veil that lay between him and the white world.” Finally, John made his way home to Georgia. He arrived home changed, went to work as the schoolteacher and tried to make some difference in the community. As he reconnected with his sister after many years, she asked if education made everyone unhappy. ““I’m afraid it does,” he said.”” Nonetheless, he answered positively when she asked if he was glad he had studied. The combination of education and new ideas made it so that John could not exist within his southern community. Racism, anger, and a new

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<sup>58</sup> The Southern Regional Council, “Services to Negro Veterans in the South,” July 1946, in The Southern Regional Council Papers, 1944-1968, Series VII: Veteran’s Service Project, 1944-1951, Reel 189, VII: 32, Southern Regional Council Papers, 1944-1968, microfilm.

determination destroyed him and his new consciousness led to a violent altercation in which John killed a white man. Unable to exist in this environment, John killed himself.<sup>59</sup>

Not so with black World War II veterans. When they left their communities and acquired that new consciousness of African-American masculinity, they arrived home to a different context than the serious young man of Du Bois' story. Despite the violence and backlash they encountered upon their return to civilian life, black veterans had the capacity to act as forces for change, simultaneously part of and apart from their community. They employed their anger and new understanding in a plethora of ways, and when they returned to their hometowns throughout the United States, black veterans forged intricate community networks that outsiders lacked the ability to create. Their anger and experiences fueled their determination to create change and push for it in new, militant, and insistent ways. These men had the trust of their communities, and even though they often had to push and prod local people to enter the struggle, their position as forces within the community provided them with a path to success. In turn, the wider, national networks that these larger civil rights organizations had created lent them the support to carry through with these local activities. When black veteran activists in Mississippi induced people in the community to take action against white oppression, prompting white economic and social reprisals, groups like the NAACP could then filter their financial or legal support through these veterans, who acted as conduits, and create the necessary conditions for revolutionary change.

African-American veterans moved their struggles outside of these community networks and civil rights organizations. Indeed, civil rights organizations like the SRC encouraged the veterans to self-organize into veterans' groups. Old-line veterans' organizations such as the

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<sup>59</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* in *W.E.B. Du Bois: Writings*, (New York, NY: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 1986), 521-535.

American Legion remained segregated and, in spite of their lip service to democratic ideals, they displayed little interest in the welfare of minority veterans.<sup>60</sup> As a result, black veterans looked to the more egalitarian groups such as the American Veterans Committee, or formed their own groups. Organizations specific to black veterans such as the Georgia Veterans League and the United Negro and Allied Veterans of America engaged in a variety of civic activities and worked to ensure a fair deal for black veterans. Each of these organizations, created on a non-discriminatory basis, met with some conservative white backlash. They encountered a political backlash more often than physical violence. These organizations mobilized veterans politically and use their military service to push for greater citizenship rights.

One of the most prominent veterans' organizations, the American Veterans Committee (AVC) began as correspondence between a group of white servicemen. They wrote of the postwar world and the principles they felt must be in place to shape the country. In their view, the old-line veterans' organizations would not sufficiently address these principles, and the veterans formed their own organization. Though technically non-partisan in nature, the AVC advocated liberal principles in politics and society. An integrated organization, the group included a non-discrimination clause in its constitution and by-laws. The group advocated for a number of issues on the national level: affordable housing, liberal credit systems, comprehensive health care and education programs, the adoption of a tax program based on the ability to pay, and the abolition of segregation. As a veterans' group, it took an interest in military affairs, advocating an extension of selective service and the end of segregation in the

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<sup>60</sup> James Hicks, "Why Veterans' Groups Should Clean House," *Afro-American (1893-198)*; Mar 5, 1949. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Baltimore Afro-American (1893-1988), p. B9.

military.<sup>61</sup> With the motto, “Citizens first, veterans second,” the group pursued a range of issues not limited to veterans’ affairs, unlike most veterans’ groups. Rather, the AVC confronted issues where the interests of veterans and citizens coincided.<sup>62</sup> A number of prominent veterans joined the AVC’s ranks, including the military cartoonist Bill Mauldin, Franklin D. Roosevelt Jr., lawyer William Robert Ming, Ronald Reagan, Medgar Evers, and future Michigan governor G. Mennen Williams.

The group coordinated efforts between national, state, and local area councils. It maintained a civilian organizational hierarchy, declining to wear uniforms or employ military orders and behavior, unlike the old-guard veterans’ organizations.<sup>63</sup> The organizational network allowed the AVC to function similarly to the NAACP. In 1946, the organization contained some 63,000 members in over 526 chapters throughout the country.<sup>64</sup> Like the SRC, the AVC advocated for African-American veterans’ benefits in the South. The group’s lawyers routinely represented black veterans attempting to obtain these benefits, using the network to provide local branches with aid from the national organization.

As it established local branches, the AVC occasionally encountered some trouble. Throughout the South, all-black chapters surfaced as many white veterans were unwilling to participate in integrated organizations. A number of towns in Texas featured exclusively

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<sup>61</sup> John Henry Richter, “The American Veterans Committee as a National Pressure Group,” May 1948, pp. 1-5, folder Richter, John—“The American Veterans Committee as a National Pressure Group, 1948, box 108; Series 5 Early History and Founding Documents, 1943-1991, MS2144/005-0108, #00005; American Veterans Committee Records, Special Collections Research Center, The George Washington University.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Hon. Carl A. Hatch, “Constitution of the American Veterans Committee: Extension of Remarks of Hon. Carl A. Hatch of New Mexico in the Senate of the United States,” 21 June 1946, folder AVC Constitution and By-Laws [1/3] 1946-54, box 104; Series 5 Early History and Founding Documents, 1943-1991, MS2144/005-0108, #00005; American Veterans Committee Records, Special Collections Research Center, The George Washington University.

African-American AVC chapters. The Jackson, Mississippi branch of the American Legion revoked the African-American legion's charter, leading to an AVC in that city. In North Carolina, AVC organizers based their recruitment efforts in larger cities when smaller towns refused to establish integrated chapters. Even in areas where members did not oppose integrated chapters, mixed race meetings violated southern custom. Integrated southern chapters might suddenly find themselves without meeting places, evicted from the local YMCA or other public venues. Some local organizations requested elasticity in interpreting the organization's membership clauses, arguing that social customs dictated gradualism, but national organizers pressed for integration wherever possible.<sup>65</sup> Even outside the South, segregation led to single-race chapters. A chapter outside of Chicago featured all-black membership as the result of neighborhood segregation, and ethnic groups dominated some other Chicago-area chapters.<sup>66</sup>

Not only did the group operate in local communities, but also on college campuses throughout the country. George Washington University declined to recognize AVC as a campus organization, characterizing it as a "national political and propaganda organization."

Administrators and veterans emphasized that the university only recognized the University Veterans Club, and recommended that the AVC chapter should not use university buildings for its meetings. George Washington's AVC elicited controversy when it picketed a play at the university auditorium, protesting the policy that prohibited African Americans from entering.

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<sup>65</sup> "American Veterans Committee National Planning Committee," Charles G. Bolte, presiding, 10 Nov 1946, pp. 55-58, 1-3, Folder: National Planning Committee Minutes, 11-10-1946, box 101; Series 5 Early History and Founding Documents, 1943-1991, MS2144/005-0108, #00005; American Veterans Committee Records, Special Collections Research Center, The George Washington University.

<sup>66</sup> Letter, Ruth Wedge Mednick to Robert Schwartz NPC 10 Jan 1951, pp. 5, 8, folder Chicago Chapter 1950-59, box 185; Series 9 Local Chapters, MS2144/005-0108, #00005; American Veterans Committee Records, Special Collections Research Center, The George Washington University.

Members incurred the displeasure of university officials again when they set up a booth at an organization fair encouraging students to vote.<sup>67</sup>

Although chapters sometimes lacked diversity, civil rights formed a significant part of the national agenda. The integrated team on the national level worked on projects and incorporated a number of prominent African Americans in leadership roles, sending a powerful message. In 1957, African-American Air Force veteran and lawyer William Robert “Bob” Ming would become the first black chairman of an integrated national veterans’ organization. The AVC leadership advocated the end of segregated education, called for civil rights legislation, and criticized politicians and organizations that supported intolerant or racist agendas. In its earliest civil rights efforts, the AVC most often used congressional testimony to challenge discriminatory laws and ensure veterans’ benefits. Yet its open advocacy for civil rights led Mississippi Congressman John Rankin and the House Committee on Veterans Affairs to ban the organization’s testimony. At that point, the AVC changed its tactics. Instead of relying mainly on congressional testimony, the group worked to promote personal contact with legislators. AVC regional councils raised funds to construct area clubhouses for meetings and events. The clubhouses also served as mixed race meeting places for the group, and they often sponsored dinners and gathers for a variety of senators, representatives, and other public officials. As guests became familiar with the group’s mission, many became active supporters.<sup>68</sup> In these early years, Bob Ming coordinated many of the planning efforts to establish a Washington D.C.

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<sup>67</sup> Dorothy Henry, “Veterans Club Files Complaint Regarding AVC: Executive Committee Protests Actions of Local American Veterans,” *The University Hatchet*, 7 Nov 1946, folder Communism 1946-1948, box 206; Series 11 Clippings, 1932-2001, MS2144/011-0206, #00005; American Veterans Committee Records, Special Collections Research Center, The George Washington University.

<sup>68</sup> John Henry Richter, “The American Veterans Committee as a National Pressure Group,” May 1948, folder Richter, John—“The American Veterans Committee as a National Pressure Group, 1948, box 108; Series 5 Early History and Founding Documents, 1943-1991, MS2144/005-0108, #00005; American Veterans Committee Records, Special Collections Research Center, The George Washington University.

area clubhouse. Ming framed the project as a “demonstration of the fact that democratic principles can be made to work in Washington and that non-segregated institutions can exist in the nation’s capital.”<sup>69</sup> The clubhouse won a Lane Bryant Annual Award (recognition of volunteer workers in projects benefitting American community and home) in 1950 for outstanding community service for its efforts fighting segregation in the District.<sup>70</sup>

The group also established a publicity network to broadcast its ideals with a constant stream of press releases, criticizing intolerance, discrimination, and misapplication of the laws. At the local level the organization called for the end of segregated education, while on the national scale it launched attacks on figures like Senator Joseph McCarthy, or publically honored others. It extended the publicity campaign to radio broadcasts as well, highlighting the importance of tolerance in the postwar world and projecting their causes into the public sphere. Despite AVC’s professed preference of “citizens first,” the group’s language constantly reminded listeners of their veteran status. The group used that military service as a reminder that, because of the sacrifices they made, they held a particular stake in the shape of the postwar world. Although the majority of its advocacy addressed civilian issues, they used any form of leverage available.

While the AVC tackled a variety of advocacy campaigns, civil rights quickly became one of its most prominent concerns. With close coordination between the various levels of the operation, local leaders accomplished a great deal in this regard. Its mixed racial and ethnic leadership, publicity campaigns, and legislative battles became instrumental in local desegregation battles throughout the country. In the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s, the

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<sup>69</sup> Letter, William Robert Ming to Victor W. Rotnem, 12 Apr 1951, William Robert Ming Papers, Collection 196-1 to 195-21, box 196-3 William Robert Ming, Jr. Papers Correspondence, Henderson-Ross, folder Correspondence—R; Manuscript Division Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

Greater Washington Area Chapter (GWAC) waged a number of effective civil rights campaigns. It emphasized desegregation of public facilities, businesses, and educational institutions. The AVC professed a determination to remain an independent organization, but it effectively constructed a number of coalitions with other regional civil rights groups, from the NAACP to the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights.

A number of prominent black veterans spearheaded the GWAC's efforts. Dr. Paul Cooke, a black Army veteran, served as the local and national chairman of the AVC at various points in his career, and focused on desegregating D.C. facilities. Cooke and the AVC picketed segregated D.C. theaters in 1948. They began a letter writing campaign to the National Theater, and the Belasco Theater in D.C. That same year, the AVC worked to desegregate recreational facilities, sending mixed groups of veterans to tennis courts, golf courses, equipment rental facilities, and swimming pools around the District. In one October 1948 report, the D.C. Civil Rights Subcommittee remarked, "We have thus far been unsuccessful in our attempts to get thrown off the courts."<sup>71</sup> They attempted to obtain meeting permits for mixed-group celebrations of Armistice Day that year as well, a request that the D.C. Board of Recreation denied. As they performed these tests, the AVC compiled lists of the recreational facilities, restaurants, and other places of entertainment that conducted business on a non-discriminatory basis, and urged others to drop discriminatory practices. The GWAC waged a campaign to desegregate employment at Safeway grocery stores in the region, forming a coalition with organizations like the New Negro Alliance and the Washington Urban League, conducting active pickets of the stores.<sup>72</sup> As they

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<sup>71</sup> Civil Rights Subcommittee, "Announcement of Meeting," 20 Oct 1948, folder: Desegregation 1948-1960, box 22; Series 1, Subseries 2: Civil Rights, 1946-2000, MS/2144/001-002, #00003; American Veterans Committee Records, Special Collections Research Center, The George Washington University.

<sup>72</sup> Paul Cooke, "Report of the GWAC-AVC Civil Rights Committee," 3 May 1948, pp. 1-2, folder: Desegregation 1948-1960, box 22; Series 1, Subseries 2: Civil Rights, 1946-2000, MS/2144/001-002, #00003; American Veterans Committee Records, Special Collections Research Center, The George Washington University.

attempted to desegregate theaters and entertainment facilities, Cooke formed alliances with the Jewish Community Council of Greater Washington, the NAACP, and the Japanese American Citizens League, urging district commissioners to enforce old anti-discrimination statutes for hotels and theaters.

As the president of Miner Teachers College, Cooke also served as head of the local American Federation of Teachers. He and his coalitions labored to desegregate District education, particularly the two teachers' colleges.<sup>73</sup> At that time, African Americans attended Miner Teacher's College, and whites, Wilson Teachers College. Later, in the 1960s and 1970s, Dr. Cooke would serve as president of the integrated institution. Cooke argued that the end of a segregated school system was the only way to provide full educational opportunity for all children. The city permitted African-American public schools to fall into disrepair, leaving students in inadequate and overcrowded facilities.<sup>74</sup> The organization cited effectively integrated school districts such as Hartford, Connecticut, and the integration taking place in military installations. They urged the D.C. Board of Education to re-examine its curriculum and prepare for impending integration: reassigning school populations and shifting teachers.<sup>75</sup>

The coalition met with some success in its D.C. integration efforts. AVC legal counsel Phineas Indritz wrote an *amicus curiae* brief for the case of *Thompson v. District of Columbia*.

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<sup>73</sup> Letter, Paul Cooke to "Friend," (other organizations in this coalition) 17 Sept 1953, folder Racial Discrimination in housing 1951-1966, box 24; Letter, Ruth Harrison to Board of Education, Public Schools of the District of Columbia, 28 Jul 1952, folder: Racial Discrimination in Schools, box 25; Series 1, Subseries 2: Civil Rights, 1946-2000, MS/2144/001-002, #00003; American Veterans Committee Records, Special Collections Research Center, The George Washington University.

<sup>74</sup> Paul Cooke, "Dual Schools," *The Washington Post* (1923-1954); Jan 6, 1950. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Washington Post (1877-1996), p. 20.

<sup>75</sup> Letter, Ruth Harrison to Board of Education, Public Schools of the District of Columbia, 28 Jul 1952; Robert Greenburg, "AVC on Integration of Schools," 3 Feb 1953, folder: Racial Discrimination in Schools, box 25; Series 1, Subseries 2: Civil Rights, 1946-2000, MS/2144/001-002, #00003; American Veterans Committee Records, Special Collections Research Center, The George Washington University.

He prosecuted the Thompson Company in the early 1950s for refusing to serve African Americans in a restaurant. Indritz wrote the legal opinion in 1953, arguing that District Laws from 1869, 1870, and 1872 prohibited discrimination in public places and had never been repealed. The U.S. Supreme Court upheld the validity of the 1873 Act, and violators faced a penalty of one-hundred dollars and a one-year license suspension. After the Supreme Court decision, the AVC informed the D.C. Commissioners that if they failed to enforce this law, the group would file a complaint within a week. The Commissioners announced that they would begin enforcing those laws January 1, 1955, the next year.<sup>76</sup>

In some respects the AVC functioned much like civil rights organizations such as the NAACP, only with a broader scope. As a non-civil rights specific group, the AVC could cast a wide membership net and accomplished certain things the civil rights organizations could not. The group's GWAC campaigns effectively combined activism at the legal and public levels. As the legal department under Phineas Indritz worked within the judicial framework to reshape legislation on segregation in public spaces, the civil rights committee under black veterans such as Dr. Cooke and Judge John Fauntleroy, a Navy reserve lawyer, reeducated public sentiment. With their public demonstrations and publicity campaigns, the committee attempted to spread a message of tolerance. Perhaps even more importantly, the AVC existed as a visible symbol of integrationist principles, particularly in the nation's capital. With Cooke, Ming, Fauntleroy, and others at the helm, the group projected an image of mixed-race social and political interaction. For this reason, the leadership concentrated on creating interracial spaces like the clubhouses. In

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<sup>76</sup> "AVC Wins Long Fight to End D.C. Hotel Discrimination," in *The AVC Bulletin*, Dec 1954, p. 7; Brief, Phineas Indritz, "Brief of Amici Curiae, on Remand in the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, No. 11.039 John R. Thompson, Co., INC., Appellant v. No. 11.044 District of Columbia Appellant, 16 Feb 1954, folder Racial Discrimination in Washington, D.C. hotels and restaurants [1/3], box 131; Series 6 Subseries 2: Indritz Legal Papers 1943-1999, MS/2144/001-002, #00003; American Veterans Committee Records, Special Collections Research Center, The George Washington University.

1946, *Harper's Magazine* recognized AVC as one of the most well-known veterans' groups in the postwar period, arguing that only two (Amvets and AVC) had risen to national prominence.<sup>77</sup>

The organization's high profile, integrationist image, and African-American leaders even in the late 1940s and early 1950s, challenged the established rules for interracial etiquette. Their insistence on mixed-race meetings and carving out these integrated spaces sent powerful messages about integration. In addition, the group catapulted their activism to the national and even international levels. As a prominent veterans' organization, the AVC participated in conferences on world leadership and could project their message to organizations such as the United Nations. Bob Ming acted as an AVC representative in a Conference of the American Association for the United Nations in 1951. While the conference aimed to educate the American citizen on policy leadership and the UN, it also highlighted the intersection of the Cold War and American race relations.<sup>78</sup> In this instance, the AVC projected an image of the U.S. veteran as a non-white male.

In the postwar period, the United States and the veterans' organizations wrestled with the question of who represented the American veteran. Veterans' organizations constantly criticized one another, each emphasizing that the other did not represent the true voice of former servicemembers. The AVC often challenged the American Legion's dominance, censuring the group as narrow-minded, bigoted, isolationist, and reactionary, especially after the Legion called for a congressional investigation of the American Civil Liberties Union as a subversive organization. Those in the AVC reasoned, "We did not risk our lives to fight Nazism, Fascism

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<sup>77</sup> Sam Stavisky, "The Veterans Make Their Choice," article reprinted from *Harper's Magazine*, Sept 1946, folder: Articles about AVC 1945-1947, box 206; Series 11 Clippings, 1932-2001, MS/2144/001-002, #00003; American Veterans Committee Records, Special Collections Research Center, The George Washington University.

<sup>78</sup> Pamphlet, Conference of the American Association for the United Nations, 25-27 Feb 1951, William Robert Ming Papers, Collection 196-1 to 196-21, box 196-5, folder 3: Organizations—American Association for the United Nations; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spangarn Research Center, Howard University.

and Communism to have our efforts misused in an effort to deprive us of our liberties and freedoms at home.”<sup>79</sup> Meanwhile, the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the Legion pegged the AVC as a subversive organization, calling for a House Un-American Activities Committee investigation.

These battles exemplified the ways that groups tried to redefine “veteran,” a title and recognition previously reserved for white men. The federal and state apparatuses and the older veterans’ groups attempted to systematically deny certain benefits to those who did not fit that white male paradigm, even denying veterans’ status to such groups as the Women’s Air Force Service Pilots. Much as the military attempted to prevent black troops from engaging in combat operations during the war, in the postwar period policymakers, white veterans, and other citizens routinely attempted to deny African Americans access to the status that went with the title. To allow these groups to identify as veterans groups, or advocate for policy as veterans implied full citizenship and equal opportunity as one who served in the military. The AVC argued for the importance of the veterans’ role as a citizen, taking an interest in domestic affairs that did not exclusively fall into the category of veterans’ affairs. With its mixed composition, the AVC pressed the ideal of the citizen soldier, dropping African-American and other minority veterans squarely into that category as well. Other organizations relegated black veterans to separate posts. With an unspoken emphasis on African Americans as veterans and citizens, the AVC could create a specific case to lobby for equal rights.

The groups’ efforts and inclusions provoked repercussions. The majority of attacks on the AVC for its egalitarian ideals came as accusations of communism. From its inception, the

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<sup>79</sup> Resolution, National Affairs, 5 Sept 1958, folder American Legion 1958, 005-0103 00001, box 103; Series 5: Early History and Founding Documents, 1943-1991, MS/2144/001-002, #00003; American Veterans Committee Records, Special Collections Research Center, The George Washington University.

AVC faced charges of that nature. A small group of communist sympathizers existed in the AVC, but more often, allegations of communism and subversive activity couched a disapproval of integrationist principles and liberal agendas. For this challenge to the social order, officials, society, and veterans groups labeled these challengers as subversive organizations or communists. The AVC experienced a split because an active group of communist sympathizers emerged in some leadership positions. After a short struggle in the late 1940s, the national leadership ousted these communist sympathizers and the National Planning Council amended the organization's constitution, banning members of totalitarian parties. Although the AVC survived this controversy, its membership declined by 1948, as many members fled the group. Other groups facing similar allegations would be less fortunate.

As African-American veterans faced ostracism from groups like the Legion or the VFW, they occasionally attempted to form black-specific organizations to address their particularly issues and concerns. The United Negro and Allied Veterans of America (UNAVA) emerged and became one of the more prominent groups, accruing a bit of influence.<sup>80</sup> Shortly after its founding in 1946, the UNAVA landed on Attorney General Tom Clark's list of subversive organizations. These allegations of communism destroyed the organization within a few years.<sup>81</sup> A few months after the organization's inception, the leaders held their first national conference in Chicago, electing Kenneth Kennedy of Alabama the first national chairman. Only twenty-one

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<sup>80</sup> "American Veterans Committee National Planning Committee," Charles G. Bolte, presiding, 10 Nov 1946, p. 2., folder National Planning Committee Minutes, 11-10-1946, box 101; Series 5: Early History and Founding Documents, 1943-1991, MS/2144/001-002, #00003; American Veterans Committee Records, Special Collections Research Center, The George Washington University.

<sup>81</sup> "Testimony of Walter S. Steele Regarding Communist Activities in the United States," 21 Jul 1947, *Hearings Before the Committee on Un-American Activities House of Representatives, Eightieth Congress*, HR 1884 and HR 2122 Bills to Curb or Outlaw the Communist Party in the United States, Public Law 601, (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1947) p. 27. Reports differ on the formation of the group, some say it formed in April in Chicago, some in January in New York.

in 1946, Kennedy served with distinction at the Battle of the Bulge and attended Talladega College upon his return. He concurrently served on the veterans committee of the Southern Negro Youth Conference.<sup>82</sup> Kennedy helped organize the Birmingham, Alabama veterans' march with H.C. Terrell in 1946, demanding the right to vote in the primary elections.<sup>83</sup> He also chaired the Alabama Veterans' Association, a statewide organization to protest discrimination in the application of G.I. Bill benefits to black veterans.<sup>84</sup>

In its few active years, the group established firm ties to the progressive labor movement and became one of the foremost veterans' organizations for African-American veterans. Leaders stressed that although the organization emphasized black rights, it welcomed white veterans.<sup>85</sup> Yet its white membership remained miniscule. The organization quickly established branches throughout the country, dividing into seven regions, each under a vice-commander who reported to Kennedy. Prominent black veterans and those who later rose to prominence found leadership roles in this organization. Coleman Young, a veteran of the 477<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group and later the first black mayor of Detroit, headed the Detroit branch of the organization. Conrad Clarke, journalist and veteran of an anti-aircraft unit in the Pacific, became the Eastern Director of Publicity in 1947. That year the organization also elected George B. Murphy Jr., editor of the *Washington Afro-American*, as the second national chairman.<sup>86</sup> John Oliver Killens, African-

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<sup>82</sup> Erik Gellman, *Death Blow to Jim Crow: The National Negro Congress and the Rise of Militant Civil Rights* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 230.

<sup>83</sup> "Testimony of Walter S. Steele Regarding Communist Activities in the United States," 28.

<sup>84</sup> "Ala. Vets Form State Association," *The Afro-American (1893-1988)*; Mar 23, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Baltimore Afro-American (1893-1988), p. 6.

<sup>85</sup> "Vet Organizations Bid for Negro Memberships," *The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967)*; Nov 2, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975), p. 9.

<sup>86</sup> Tim Wheeler, "Black History Month: George B. Murphy, Jr., journalist for the people," 17 Feb 2011 in *People's World*, [http://www.peoplesworld.org/black-history-month-george-b-murphy-jr-journalist-for-the-people#PageComment\\_104888](http://www.peoplesworld.org/black-history-month-george-b-murphy-jr-journalist-for-the-people#PageComment_104888); "George B. Murphy Named New UNAVA Commander: Convention Urges

American writer and Army veteran, served in the Pacific as well and commanded the local Washington, D.C. Chapter of the organization. After hearing about Isaac Woodard in 1946 and the difficulty black veterans encountered as they sought housing and employment, Killens felt compelled to join the struggle.<sup>87</sup> The organization obtained more publicity when it recruited Joe Louis as the honorary chairman.

George B. Murphy described the fight for housing, employment, and income as the most pressing of the postwar problems that black veterans faced.<sup>88</sup> Throughout its existence, the UNAVA prioritized this issue. In 1946 Kenneth Kennedy toured UNAVA chapters in high tension areas, generating a report for the organization. The group mobilized to back the Wagner-Ellender-Taft general housing bill, supporting the construction of hundreds of thousands of public housing units.<sup>89</sup> Their studies revealed housing discrimination throughout the country. In New York, the state UNAVA charged that owners often boarded up houses rather than sell to black tenants. One Harlem landlord boarded up four apartment buildings, subtracting their value from his income tax rather than repair them or rent to black families.<sup>90</sup>

In Chicago, veterans of all races faced severe housing shortages, though in early 1946 only about 115 of 9,000 temporary housing units the city erected were designated for black

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Passage of FEPC Bil, Soldiers' Bonus, Terminal Pay in Cash," *The Baltimore Afro-American (1893-1988)*; Jun 14, 1947. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Baltimore Afro-American (1893-1988), p. 7. While Murphy later had socialist leanings, particularly after a trip to the Soviet Union in the 1970s, the extent to which he held these beliefs in the 1940s is unclear.

<sup>87</sup> Keith Gilyard, *John Oliver Killens: A Life of Black Literary Activism*, (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 70-71.

<sup>88</sup> "Cites Plight of Negro Vets: UNAVA Chief Claims Ex-GIs Impoverished," *The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967)*; Jun 28, 1947. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975), p. 8.

<sup>89</sup> "UNAVA Plans Housing Fight: Interracial Vets Map New Strategy," *The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967)*; Oct 5, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975), p. 4.

<sup>90</sup> "Vets Charge Owners Refuse to Rent Homes," *The Chicago Defender (National edition (1921-1967))*; Oct 12, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975), p. 7.

veterans.<sup>91</sup> Later that year the city discovered a group of (presumably white) veterans squatting at a housing project near the West Lawn neighborhood. The housing authority filed suit against five of the veterans, but eventually dropped charges and converted the project into veterans' relief housing. In December 1946, the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) opened the Airport Housing Project. The CHA included seven black veterans and their families in the housing project, partially at Kennedy and the UNAVA's insistence. The group had filed a lawsuit against the city earlier in 1946 for hotel discrimination, and it maintained its involvement in Chicago desegregation efforts.<sup>92</sup>

On December 5, 1946, three of the black veterans began moving into the new residences. While the veterans themselves had not yet arrived, a mob of angry white citizens, estimates ranged between 200 and 600 demonstrators, met the moving trucks with the veterans' possessions. The frenzied mob, including many white housewives, shouted racial epithets and threw stones, bricks, and other projectiles at policemen, CHA officials, and even white veterans. A detail of Chicago policemen attempted to keep the outbreak under control "by spanking angry housewives with their clubs and barring all traffic from the vicinity of the project."<sup>93</sup> Older citizens in the mob encouraged white children to throw rocks and mud at the house. The mob overturned UNAVA Commander Kenneth Kennedy's vehicle though police pulled him from the fray unharmed. Another carload of white citizens chased CHA officials from the site and reportedly overturned that car as well. John Ford and Letholian Waddell, two of the black

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<sup>91</sup> "Only 115 of 9,000 Temporary Homes Go to Negro Vets," *The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967)*; Jan 12, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975), p. 6.

<sup>92</sup> "UNAVA to Sue Hotels in Chicago for Bias," *The Afro-American (1893-1988)*; July 13, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Baltimore Afro-American (1893-1988), p. 15.

<sup>93</sup> "8 Injured by Rocks in Riot at Negro GI's Move into Chicago Housing Development," *The New York Times (1923-Current file)*; Dec 6, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2009), p 26.

veterans, declared that the disorder would not prevent them from occupying their assigned homes, and they would “stay to fight to a finish.”<sup>94</sup> White veterans in the housing projects exhibited mixed reactions. Reports noted that some white veterans participated in the riot, one even rushing toward Kennedy’s car and screaming, “You nigger bastards will never do here what I saw you do in France and England.” The local American Legion Post also demanded that black veterans be ousted from the white community. Yet other white veterans living in the area rallied in support of the black veterans at the housing project, welcoming “all veterans” and their families to the area.<sup>95</sup>

The Airport Housing Riots in 1946 set the tone for future violent outbreaks in the Chicago area as black veterans continued to look for housing in the postwar period. In some cases, black Chicagoans worked to solve their own housing problems. Black contractors built relief housing, and civic organizations started programs to recondition existing properties and expand the available housing for African Americans in the city. In the years immediately following the war, it seemed that federally-sponsored, low-rent housing construction ground to a halt.<sup>96</sup> As black veterans struggled to find housing, white Chicagoans lashed out and violent outbreaks ensued, one of the most notable in the Cicero Riots of 1951. The Airport Riots also demonstrated tension between veterans and Chicago authorities. Not only did some white veterans lash out at the presence of black veterans in the housing projects, but many exhibited a great deal more anger with the Chicago Housing Authority, mismanagement of veterans’

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Vernon Jarrett, “Mob Lays Siege to Negro, White Vets in Housing Project,” *The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967)*; Nov 23, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975), p. 1.

<sup>96</sup> Albert G. Barnett, “Chicago Negroes Fight Housing Shortage, Build their Own Homes,” *The Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967)*; Jun 7, 1947. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender (1910-1975), p. 13.

housing projects, and lack of housing. Those white veterans who occupied the Airport Housing Projects earlier in the year charged the Chicago authorities with inefficiency, irregularities, and authoritarianism, and took their case directly to federal authorities.<sup>97</sup> The series of incidents highlighted the disenchantment that many returning veterans of all races displayed with civil authorities, civilians, and the distrust of returning veterans some of the American public exhibited.

In its tenure as a veterans' organization, the UNAVA often found itself at the center of heated exchanges like the airport housing riot. The immediate need for housing led to the group's outspoken and forceful style of advocacy. Although the group achieved a great deal of publicity, especially from the black press, other organizations (notably the AVC) hesitated to cooperate with the UNAVA. Instead, the UNAVA cooperated with local urban leagues in the quest for affordable housing. With the organization's blunt criticism of administrations and politics, the group developed a reputation as incendiary. In early 1947 the Veterans Administration barred the UNAVA from its list of approved and officially recognized organizations, arguing that the UNAVA did not meet administrative requirements for recognition. George B. Murphy, Jr. lashed out at the VA, retorting that the group's large membership, widespread support, and demonstrated efficiency in handling veterans' claims refuted the VA's denial of formal recognition. "The VA apparently does not wish to deal officially with an organization which fights for the rights and benefits of Negro veterans," Murphy chafed.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Orville Dwyer, "Vets Protest CHA 'Whims' in Squatter Case: Win Jury Trials; Seek Action by Truman," *The Chicago Daily Tribune (1923-1963)*; Nov 13, 1946. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune (1849-1989), p. 11.

<sup>98</sup> "UNAVA Hits VA; Issues Bias Charge," *The New York Amsterdam News (1943-1961)*; Mar 29, 1947. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Amsterdam News (1922-1993), p. 5.

The VA's actions only signified the beginning of the trouble, and the group soon found itself victim to other persecution. In spring 1947, Brooklyn police raided a UNAVA clubhouse as the group held a housewarming. The police eventually charged UNAVA members for distributing liquor without a license. In response, the Brooklyn UNAVA formed a defense committee, distributing pamphlets on police harassment in the city, enlisting Jackie Robinson's (honorary New York state commander) aid to bring the issue to the public's attention.<sup>99</sup>

As journalist Conrad Clarke, the group's Eastern Director of Publicity, tried to resuscitate the organization's public image, he found himself accused of communism in June 1947. Clarke styled the charges as "false and malicious," conveying that "any time a person or group of persons tries to get interested in trying to make democracy a reality for the minorities of this country, someone brands the effort as 'Communist-inclined.'"<sup>100</sup> In July 1947 Walter Steele, editor of the *New Republic* magazine, testified in front of a subcommittee of the House Committee on Un-American Activities: Representatives Richard M. Nixon, J. Parnell Thomas, and Richard B. Vail. Steele testified about "ramifications of the Communist Party of the United States," and included in his testimony a lengthy indictment of the United Negro and Allied Veterans of America, which he referred to as a Red front veterans' movement. In his testimony on the group, Steele named a number of the veteran leaders, describing them as communists.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> "UNAVA Clubhouse Raided During Festive Occasion," *The New York Age*, April 26, 1947, p. 7-12.

<sup>100</sup> "UNAVA Insists Red Charge a 'Lie,'" *The New York Amsterdam News (1943-1961)*; Jun 21, 1947. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Amsterdam News (1922-1993), p. 3.

<sup>101</sup> "Testimony of Walter S. Steele Regarding Communist Activities in the United States," 21 July 1947, 27-28.

Attorney General Tom C. Clark soon added the UNAVA to his list of subversive organizations under the “Communist” classification.<sup>102</sup>

By 1951 the group was defunct, destroyed by constant allegations of communism. As Clarke argued, whenever a group advocated for the rights of minorities it faced accusations of communism, essentially coded language to undermine the civil rights struggles in the late 1940s and early 1950s. As the Cold War heated up and the U.S. found it could not necessarily support openly discriminatory laws, rules and organizations started to include non-discriminatory clauses, denoting that they did not discriminate on the basis of race, ethnicity or religion. To so openly contradict the professed ideals of liberty and equality hurt the United States on the international stage. The allegations of communism allowed officials to work around this rhetorical problem, labeling civil rights organizers as subversive in other respects to undermine their efforts. While organizations like the NAACP found firm footing with established organization and conservative leadership, others such as the AVC and UNAVA had less traction. Progressive veterans groups presented a dangerous challenge to an emerging Cold War consensus. The AVC enjoyed stronger networks and its membership included many prominent and influential white veterans. They managed to weed the communist element out of the organization and write an anti-communist clause into its constitution. Unable to do so, and without the political clout of the AVC, the UNAVA floundered in the late 1940s and crashed shortly thereafter.

Just as the AVC sought to redefine the idea of the veteran in the postwar years, the UNAVA advocated specifically for a different type of veteran. Groups with similar aims frequently emerged as veterans reentered society: the United Veterans for Equality, Veterans

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<sup>102</sup> “Clark Adds Four to Red Group List: Reclassifies Organizations Rated Subversive with 82 Called Communist, 15 Fascist,” *The New York Times* (1923-Current file); Sept 26, 1948. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2009), p. 22.

Against Discrimination, or the United Veterans of Georgia. Not only did they challenge the idea of the veteran as a white male, but they contradicted certain ideas about veterans' political priorities. Civilian society in the postwar years displayed a great deal of anxiety about the "veteran problem." Veteran dissent (manifested in incidents like the Athens, Tennessee battles in which white and black veterans overturned a corrupt local government) threatened postwar peace, and officials invested a great deal into re-integrating veterans into civilian society, retraining them to conform to civilian social norms.<sup>103</sup> As a result, these veterans' groups that challenged social norms sometimes met with limited success before civilians, authorities, or policymakers conceived of ways to block the challenges they presented. The actions against these groups manifested in a variety of forms—from violent riots like those in Chicago, to discrediting their organizational authenticity as veterans groups, to allegations of communism. With attempts to discredit the organization's authenticity as a veterans' organization, critics questioned the black veterans' legitimacy as veterans and as citizens.

The reprisals limited the effectiveness of the veterans groups' advocacy. Yet the groups very existence presented a challenge to the social system and re-integration of the veteran into society. As groups like the AVC publically insisted upon racial integration and in some instances undertook effective advocacy with mixed groups of veterans, they projected a new understanding of veterans and military service to the American public. The AVC accommodated white ethnic veterans, African Americans, and WASPs. But these "traditional" white male veterans defied the social hierarchy and challenged social norms. As black veterans moved into leadership positions, at times leading white male veterans, they again challenged social mores, and established African-American military service as legitimate.

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<sup>103</sup> Robert Francis Saxe, *Settling Down: World War II Veterans' Challenge to the Postwar Consensus* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 16-18.

In questioning the authenticity and legitimacy of black military service, policymakers and white groups attempted to keep these veterans invisible. Writer Ralph Ellison addressed the idea of black invisibility in his 1952 novel *Invisible Man*. Ellison described the struggles of a nameless narrator, hounded by the pressures and expectations of black and white society. After an eventual fall out with his political organization, his fellow agitators threatened the narrator and chased him underground in an attempt to lynch him. The narrator had remained underground ever since, in a hole “warm and full of light.”<sup>104</sup> He described himself as invisible because although he had a physical presence, people refused to see him beyond skin color. It took him years to realize the extent of his invisibility, the narrator admitted, and he “did not become alive” until he discovered his invisibility.<sup>105</sup> “You go along for years knowing something is wrong, then suddenly you discover that you’re as transparent as air. . . . and you stand naked and shivering before the millions of eyes who look through you unseeingly. *That is the real soul-sickness.*”<sup>106</sup>

To give shape to his form, the narrator stole electricity from a power company, wiring the ceiling and filling his hole with 1,369 lights. He explained that “light confirms my reality, gives birth to my form.” The darkness could not only render one invisible, but formless as well, “and to be unaware of one’s form is to live a death.”<sup>107</sup> When W.E.B. Du Bois mused in 1940 over the concept of race and explained that the superior race was “that which had a history, the white race,” he touched upon the same issue. History, self-consciousness, and knowledge gave form to

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<sup>104</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage International, 1952), 6.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid*, 575.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid*, 6-7.

a people.<sup>108</sup> In the postwar period, society's attempt to eliminate African-American veterans from the narrative of World War II worked to negate the veterans' form and history. Almost akin to a social death, banishment from society, white Americans sought to erase black contributions, deny them the benefits and status that their military service merited, and keep them second-class citizens. When other veterans' groups or policymakers called the legitimacy of black veterans' organizations into question, they were actually attempting to systematically expunge the veterans' citizenship and claims to Americanness. Yet like Ellison's invisible man, the veterans fought back to gain that form that other factions in society attempted to deny. As Ellison's narrator filled his hole with light, attempting to feel his "vital aliveness," the veterans employed every element at their disposal to combat the white backlash to their new position and consciousness. They fought as individuals, becoming more violent, militant, and insisting upon their right to armed self-defense. Black veterans also insisted upon receiving the promised benefits, many times unsuccessfully, but they pushed to insert themselves into that category of "veteran," and both the veterans and the rest of black society constantly reminded whites of the veterans' presence.

When black veterans returned to civilian society they struggled to obtain basic rights and living space, but they also strove to carve out a new place within society. Their experiences overseas changed them; they no longer resembled the men who left home for the military years before. Like Du Bois' John who had become a "tall, grave man," and who "looked now for the first time sharply about him, and wondered he had seen so little before," the veterans returned with a new consciousness and sense of self.<sup>109</sup> In their searches to employ these new capabilities

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<sup>108</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* in *Du Bois: Writings*, 626.

<sup>109</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903, in *Du Bois: Writings*, 525.

and understandings, they sought and created organizations to concentrate and maximize their advocacy efforts. Within longstanding organizations, the veterans brought more militant methods to the table. Their numbers, consciousness, boldness, and education allowed them to forge stronger organizational networks, reaching black communities and individuals that had previously been out of reach for many of these organizations. In the Mississippi Delta, the insistent efforts of black veterans at organizing and pushing the community to engage proved invaluable.

As they branched out further and created their own organizations or joined veteran-specific groups, they expanded the range of their activism, employing every element at their disposal. They trumpeted their military service, grasping at the citizenship rights that it should have supplied. In response, others sought to make that service invisible, and employed non-racial rhetoric to combat the potential socio-political effects of that activism. In large part, the backlash silenced the advocacy of black veterans as a group, modulating the effects of their service and leaving them largely absent from a postwar narrative. It did not, however, decrease their impact as individuals determined to push for change in communities throughout the country and obtain their due not only as veterans but as Americans with all the rights and privileges that accompanied full citizenship. They had paid their obligation and some of their peers had given what President Lincoln called the “last full measure of devotion.” With their networks, their outspokenness, occasional militancy, and determination to be American, black veterans spearheaded many of these early civil rights efforts, leading into an even more tumultuous period in African-American history. As they arrived home, black veterans became precipitants for change—and a prelude to a revolution.

## Conclusion

Marine James Ferguson explained that a book on the Pacific War claimed that there were no black marines on Okinawa. “So maybe I was not black and I was not a marine, ‘cause I sure was on Okinawa,” Ferguson remarked sardonically. “It’s bad enough to be *left* out of history . . . but to be written out,” is infinitely worse.<sup>1</sup> A black tanker said much the same. While he watched a World War II film, he saw units his battalion supported in France. He did not see himself or any trace of the black support troops.<sup>2</sup> In the past few decades the literature on the black experience in the World War II military has expanded.<sup>3</sup> The historiography continues to expand as scholars examine specific services and units.<sup>4</sup> What remains largely unexamined is

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<sup>1</sup> James Ferguson, interview by Sarah Barksdale, 17 Nov 2011, Washington D.C.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis S. Conn, interview by William Bruckner, Lewis S. Conn Collection (AFC/2001/001/43716), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>3</sup> Ulysses Lee, *The Employment of Negro Troops* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History United States Army, 1966), is the standard for operational history of African-American soldiers in World War II. Samuel Stouffer, *The American Soldier: Adjustment During Army Life*, vol. 1 *Studies in Social Psychology in World War II* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1949-1950) provides many critical statistics on education and origin. Scholars in the 1970s increasingly examined war and society, and historians like Neil Wynn, *The Afro-American and the Second World War* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1976) explored the political, economic, cultural, and social effects of the war. Historians eventually began examining the experiences of individual servicemen, like Mary Penick Motley, *The Invisible Soldier: The Experience of the Black Soldier, World War II* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1975) and Maggi Morehouse, *Fighting in the Jim Crow Army: Black Men and Women Remember World War II* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000). The number of works on African-American participation has increased substantially. The topic has also received some coverage within broader histories of African-American military service. Bernard Nalty’s *Strength for the Fight: A History of Black Americans in the Military* (New York: Free Press, 1986) provides an ample overview of the black military experience in the Second World War, and Gerald Astor’s *The Right to Fight: A History of African Americans in the Military* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1998) provides similar coverage. Another treatment includes Gail Buckley’s *American Patriots: The Story of Blacks in the Military from the Revolution to Desert Storm* (New York: Random House, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> There are broader studies of particular services like Lee’s *Employment of Negro Troops*: Alan M. Osur, *Blacks in the Army Air Forces During World War II: The Problems of Race Relations* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, United States Air Force, 1986); Henry I. Shaw, Jr. and Ralph W. Donnelly, *Blacks in the Marine Corps* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Marine Corps, History and Museums Division, 1975); Melton Alonzo McLaurin,

the role of black veterans in shaping the postwar world. As chapter six argued, people in society battled over the identity of the American veteran, and many tried to avoid including anyone except the white American male. With more controversial groups such as the United Negro and Allied Veterans of America, detractors generally found success. Their attempts to shutter the image of a black man as the American veteran, combined with the wartime attempts to keep black men out of combat, largely rendered the wartime contributions of African-American servicemen invisible. The NAACP Executive Secretary during the 1940s, Walter White, expressed this very concern near the end of the war: if histories slighted black servicemen's wartime achievements, it could limit the long-term impact of their service.<sup>5</sup> This invisibility contributed to the subsequent dearth of accounts of black military service during this period, and the continued lack of understanding of the importance of the black veteran.<sup>6</sup>

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*The Marines of Montford Point: America's First Black Marines* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Ronald Culp, *The First Black United States Marines: The Men of Montford Point, 1942-1946* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2007). Many histories of African-American troops in World War II center on particular units. There are numerous studies on the Tuskegee Airmen, such as Stanley Sandler, *Segregated Skies: Black Combat Squadrons of World War II* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution History of Aviation Series, 1992); John Holway, *Red Tails, Black Wings: The Men of America's Black Air Force* (Las Cruces, NM: Yucca Tree Press, 1997); Charles Francis, *The Tuskegee Airmen: The Men Who Changed a Nation* (Boston: Branden Publishing, 1993); Lawrence P. Scott and William M. Womack, Sr., *Double V: The Civil Rights Struggle of the Tuskegee Airmen* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1994) which mainly focuses on the Tuskegee Airmen during the war; and J. Todd Moye, *Freedom Flyers: The Tuskegee Airmen of World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). There is still very limited coverage of African-American sailors' experiences outside of the larger histories from Bernard Nalty or Gerald Astor. Some of these include: Richard E. Miller, *The Messman Chronicles: African Americans in the U.S. Navy, 1932-1943* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2004) used a great deal of oral history to examine messmen's experiences in the interwar years and WWII Pacific. Paul Stillwell, ed., *The Golden Thirteen: Recollections of the First Black Naval Officers* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1993); Robert Allen, *The Port Chicago Mutiny: The Story of the Largest Mass Mutiny Trial in U.S. Naval History* (Berkeley, CA: Heyday Books, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Ronald Krebs, *Fighting for Rights: Military Service and the Politics of Citizenship* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 158.

<sup>6</sup> There is a small body of literature specifically on black World War II veterans. Christopher Parker, *Fighting For Democracy: Black Veterans and the Struggle Against White Supremacy in the Postwar South* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009) is the only book that explores black veterans' involvement in postwar civil rights struggles. He addressed some similar questions as my study, but explored issues from a quantitative perspective, addressing the idea of black republicanism. Robert Francis Saxe, *Settling Down: World War II Veterans' Challenge to the Postwar Consensus* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007) included a chapter on black veterans and discussed the American Veterans Committee. Jennifer E. Brooks looked at black and white veterans political

The relationship between citizenship and military service remains important in Western culture. Violence forms a connection between the state and society, and through military service people can claim citizenship rights. For many European nations, conscription played an important role in shaping national identity. The military institution has acted as a “school for the nation,” imparting certain facets of national identity and belonging to its members.<sup>7</sup> Political scientist Ronald Krebs argued that particularly in a postwar period, marginalized groups in search of “first-class citizenship” have an opportunity to use that military service as a rhetorical device. Depending on the rhetorical choices that the marginalized groups make, the prevailing discourse of citizenship within the society, and the potential for continued use of that rhetoric, these groups could meet varying degrees of success. In certain contexts, a combination of factors might make these efforts more successful. Political leaders have a more difficult time denying the marginalized groups’ demands in a particular ideological climate. The military experience might also shape future leaders, and offer them greater influence or legitimacy in the political arena.<sup>8</sup>

African-American servicemen and the larger black community in the United States had always understood the significance of military service. If not necessarily the theoretical framework of that service, they knew that their sacrifices should provide access to equal treatment and opportunity. But all immediately recognized the hypocrisy of serving in a segregated military. Initially, the armed services denied their requests to participate, challenging

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interests and how those clashed after the war in *Defining the Peace: World War II Veterans, Race, and the Remaking of Southern Political Tradition* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004). Neil R. McMillen’s chapter, “Fighting for What We Didn’t Have,” in *The Impact of World War II on the American South*, ed. Neil R. McMillen (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 1997) discusses black veterans in Mississippi.

<sup>7</sup> Krebs, *Fighting for Rights*, 1-4; Stanislaw Andreski, *Military Organization and Society* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1968).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

this claim to citizenship through military service. When African Americans did enter the military, they contended with racist perceptions of their capabilities. These perceptions resulted in menial labor positions for many black servicemen, excessive training time, and exclusion from combat duty. Several commanders did not believe that black servicemen had the capacity to become good soldiers, sailors, airmen, or marines. Others simply preferred not to deal with the racial tensions their presence might create. Black troops discerned the hypocrisy inherent in fighting for freedom and democracy while suffering second-class or worse citizenship. and they grew increasingly impatient and angry. Their frustration generated a number of racial outbreaks for those black troops stationed stateside. The protests ranged from the raucous violence of the 364<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment at Camp Van Dorn in 1943 to the more studied, calculated protest of the 477<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group at Freeman Field in 1946. Throughout the war, their anger bubbled and overflowed, and their sense of fury transferred into the postwar period as well.

For the servicemen overseas, the hypocrisy surfaced in other fashions. Their interactions with white American servicemen led black troops to question their status as Americans, emphasizing the problem of what W.E.B. Du Bois called “double consciousness,” the problem of reconciling black identity with American identity. He explained that African Americans in the U.S. possessed two separate identities and were constantly striving to merge these two selves. Yet in merging the two parts, “he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost,” because each constituted an important part of self-identity, and Americanness. “He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.”<sup>9</sup> Overseas, the experience angered black troops, but a range of other encounters sometimes tempered that rage.

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<sup>9</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* in *W.E.B. Du Bois: Writings* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 1986), 364-365.

Across the world, black troops like Dudley Randall marveled at new places; “I met the people who lived there, and it opened my eyes to the wonder and the beauty and the variety of the world.”<sup>10</sup> Many black servicemen had lived in insularity within the U.S., lacking the means and opportunity to travel. It proved radicalizing for some. African-American troops explored Rome, Paris, Calcutta, Cairo, and the range of sights and curiosities associated with each. Their interactions with people abroad shattered some of their previous conceptions about race. In Europe, they formed generally favorable impressions of white civilians in terms of hospitality and sexual and romantic liaisons. These relationships highlighted the unnaturalness of the racial order within the United States and taught some that cordiality and even love could exist across the colorline. It chipped away at the Jim Crow education that dominated their understanding of the social order. Although the Pacific offered a substantially different experience, their anger and frustration left many black troops desperate to climb out of the imposed racial hierarchy even as white Americans strove to keep it in place. The resulting violent clashes again altered the notion of appropriate and feasible black and white relations. Their experiences led them to question their identity as Americans, and push the boundaries of interracial interactions that existed on the homefront.

For the limited numbers of black troops in combat, that experience also shifted their perceptions of race relations. As American troops worked toward a common goal under fire, their efforts to stay alive outweighed their concern for social constructs. On the front lines, race became secondary. Combat demonstrated a common humanity to black and white troops, and counteracted for many the myth of white supremacy. At times, they witnessed battlefield equality, and as they assisted one another as Americans, or as white troops discovered a powerful

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<sup>10</sup> Melba Joyce Boyd, *Wrestling with the Muse: Dudley Randall and the Broadside Press* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 66.

adversary in the Japanese (another “other”), the experience revealed the fallacy of white invincibility. In turn, African-American servicemen attempted to prove their own validity and masculinity through combat while authorities sought to prevent access to this brand of military service, and hence to reinforce the social norm of lesser citizenship. When Lieutenant Robert Madison of the 371<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment displayed his uniform, battle ribbons, and Purple Heart, he claimed the combat service and martial masculine citizenship repeatedly denied to African Americans. Just as servicemen and authorities had clashed over the inclusion of African Americans in the military, they quarreled again over black combat service. Whatever their intentions in limiting black combat service, it resulted in another method by which institutions and officials on the homefront could later contest the validity of black military service.

Scattered throughout the world, black servicemen underwent a broad range of experiences. Their duties ranged from combat operations in Italy, to stevedoring in the Pacific, to constructing roads in Burma. Some served on ships and interacted regularly with white servicemen, while others remained in segregated enclaves such as all-black Fort Huachuca, Arizona. Each of these experiences complicated their understanding of race, their sense-of-self as Americans, and opened their consciousness to new possibilities and limitations. For some, the anger against restriction, discrimination, mistreatment, and hypocrisy launched their determination to fight. Some gained a more expansive understanding of place, America in the world, and became aware of the disingenuousness of the American system. Even as others decided that if they could fight fascism around the world, they could certainly fight to bring greater equality at home. One common denominator endured across that broad spectrum: change. Or rather, a broader understanding of the world. Marine James Ferguson pondered, it was hard to say what he was before, but “by virtue of being in the Marines I saw parts of the

world that I never would have seen, and it expanded my horizons and made me wiser.”<sup>11</sup> Soldier Isham Benton concurred: If you did not change, you were not looking at the world with your eyes open.<sup>12</sup> The total war transformed social landscapes across the world, and for the oppressed races and classes of many nations, it presented an opportunity to petition and struggle for a different place in the new order.

Armed with these fresh ideas, as African-American servicemen returned to the United States and became civilians once again, their homecoming reified that new consciousness. While their military service suggested that they should occupy a first-class citizenship, the situation on the homefront actively rejected this interpretation. They frequently came back to open hostility from a white American society terrified of what they represented and confused by shifting national and international social and political patterns. The official channels established to ease the veterans’ transition back into society consistently shortchanged African Americans. Like white veterans, they had to deal with a sluggish and for them, often unresponsive bureaucracy to obtain a range of benefits: housing, employment, medical care, loans, and education. Yet with local administration of these programs many black veterans obtained subpar benefits or none at all. Historians have often pointed out that these events led to greater disparities between black and white achievement and economics. At the same time, in many parts of the country black veterans faced the hatred and brutality of the white population. A wave of opposition met them as they returned home, and 1946 witnessed violent outbreaks throughout the country. The outright antagonism and rejection of their sacrifices disillusioned many.

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<sup>11</sup> James Ferguson, interview by Sarah Barksdale, 17 Nov 2011, Washington D.C.

<sup>12</sup> Isham Benton, interview by Douglas Clanin, Isham George Benton Collection (AFC/2001/001/9170), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

The dissonance of 1946 had some impact, though it took time for actual change to occur. A new political situation, significantly different from the year after the First World War, existed; the violent white backlash met challenges in 1946 that it did not in 1919. Activists and politicians took note of the situation. For a variety of contested reasons, Truman acted against the injustices and moved to remedy some of the most glaring injustices, including the hypocrisy of a segregated military. Civil rights organizations and activists used their increasing political leverage to intervene as well. Their actions saved some veterans' lives, such as Johnny Craft in Mississippi who made his way to Jackson and the protection of federal authorities. The black press simultaneously broadcasted each injustice and juxtaposed it with victims' military service, highlighting the hypocrisies of the American system at every opportunity. In an emerging cold war environment, where American actions received increasing scrutiny on an international stage, even the issue of civil rights held some significance.

The devastating reception defeated some. Others drew strength from the injustice and forged ahead. Veteran Wiley A. Branton declared, "I returned to Pine Bluff with a deep feeling that if I could go to the Pacific and fight to "help make the world safe for democracy," I would certainly try and bring some democracy back to Arkansas."<sup>13</sup> African-American veterans channeled this consciousness into a variety of protest forms. In their everyday lives, black veterans refused to bow to white intimidation as the violence broke out around the country. They consciously crossed racial and gendered boundaries as they sought to obtain the respect and benefits to which they knew themselves entitled. When administrators refused to grant them entry to white institutions, black veterans demanded admission and used a variety of legal and

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<sup>13</sup> Wiley A. Branton, "Remarks," 22 May 1988, Wiley A. Branton Papers, Collectio 187-1 to 187-18, Wiley . Branton Papers Writings by Branton 187-11, folder 28: Writings by Branton—Remarks . . . Thirteenth Annual Commencement Exercises of the Antioch School of Law, May 22, 1988; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

symbolic tactics. It resulted in additional education for some black veterans. While the administrative bureaucracy posed hurdles, the G.I. Bill spurred extra opportunity and social mobility. Black veterans gained some additional access to a growing black middle class, leading to greater political power in the postwar period. Even if they advanced in small numbers, the benefits enabled them to mobilize and aid others with no access to these benefits.

In the postwar period, these veterans organized and assisted their communities in invaluable ways. As they permeated civil rights organizations in significant numbers, their attitudes, abilities, education, and mobility catapulted them into leadership positions. These veterans used their (sometimes slight) privilege to marshal and occasionally coerce others in the black community to action. Within these organizational frameworks, black veterans constructed new and intricate social networks, gained the trust of those in the communities, and reached out to larger institutional structures for support and guidance. They bridged a gap between community and organization, infiltrating local areas and working to implement these overarching organizational agendas in a manner supportive of that particular population. The African-American veterans also brought a new, more militant style of advocacy, and it showed in the successive violent clashes between black veterans and white citizens as the men refused to acquiesce to the denial of their rights or outright white brutality. At times they even went on the offensive. After their military service, African-American veterans insisted upon their right to arm themselves for protection. Their style was anything but passive.

In another effort to funnel that new consciousness into productive channels, black veterans used their military service to advocate for change. Although some officials actively worked to prevent the veterans from obtaining the type of service indicating a claim to American citizenship, black veterans refused to be overlooked. They organized veterans groups in the

postwar period, looking out for their particular rights as veterans and addressing larger issues within U.S. society. The veterans and the black press advertised the military service and emphasized the rights that it generated by law. With some success in large organizations like the AVC, those groups specifically created to advocate for black veterans' issues met with vigorous political resistance and collapse. Although their individual efforts appeared to contribute little to the mammoth legal and political struggles underway, the social transgressions of the veterans helped reshape the American understanding of race in the postwar period. The networks they established took black activism to new levels, and groups like the NAACP enjoyed record membership until the increased white backlash of the mid-1950s.

The veterans waged these struggles in a specific context that permitted these all of these shifts to occur. Just as the violence of 1946 differed from that of 1919, the political, economic, and social environments and rhetoric of the day diverged from what had come before 1940. The level of black mobilization and military service in World War II existed on a theretofore unheard of scale. Well over a million African Americans served in the World War II military, all over the world. The African-American community as a whole made tremendous leaps during the war in terms of employment and anti-discrimination regulation. While the majority of civil-rights legislation did not emerge for nearly twenty years, black workers made staggering gains as they moved to northern industrial centers and entered the defense industry.<sup>14</sup>

Black political power expanded tremendously throughout the war. Civil rights still constituted a political liability when President Truman issued his 1948 order to desegregate the

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<sup>14</sup> Krebs, *Fighting for Rights*, 150-152, 162-163. Krebs downplayed the importance of many of these contextual issues, saying that although they are important, the ways in which African Americans framed their rhetorical devices (citizenship and military service) played a larger role in the successes or failures post-World War II. Veterans are conspicuously absent from his account, however, and I would argue that these contextual issues form a framework in which the veterans can perform certain actions with less repercussion and greater success in some instances. Indeed, Krebs noted that the contemporary political environment sent certain signals making that postwar activism harder for state leaders to counter.

military. But black activism and voting power could no longer be ignored. When A. Philip Randolph threatened his massive march on Washington in 1941, he introduced a hardnosed new style of political advocacy. He and others continued this tactic into the postwar period, vigorously insisting upon military integration. The activists prompted any federal constraints on postwar violence against black veterans, however slight. With structures like the black cabinet in place, groups of informal black advisers within government agencies, an awareness of African-American political concerns had crept into the federal establishment.

President Truman's 1948 executive order signaled the beginning of a shift in the military establishment. Although the military did not implement the order until the Korean War, it produced important results. The situation for black servicemen did not immediately change. Yet the scale of mobilization in the Second World War had prompted the military establishment to reexamine its practice for a more effective utilization of African-American personnel in the future. Rising numbers of African Americans in the military following the war also meant that current practices had to change. Military desegregation from 1948 -1954 represented a monumental institutional shift and a factor that reshaped American collective memory and understanding of race and integration.<sup>15</sup> The postwar context allowed this institutional machinery to move forward at that moment in history.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 175-177. Again, Krebs argued that military desegregation did not have the argued impact upon the Civil Rights Movement that is often assumed. He described it as, "of symbolic importance," but without the reverberations that some had estimated. While as he points out, there were certainly limits to the military's manpower policy as a signal for political action, I would suggest that Krebs oversimplified the concept of "impact" on civil rights. He concluded that, without evidence to show that military desegregation affected large moments in the Civil Rights Movement (Montgomery Bus Boycott, Greensboro sit-in), one cannot claim that military integration shaped or caused the movement. I think this also oversimplifies the idea of the Civil Rights Movement down to particular specific protest actions. In reality, the CRM also signaled larger sociological and ideological shifts within the American population. In effect, that "symbolic importance" could have great repercussions on the American understanding of the racial order and normality. While as he points out it does not lead to greater acceptance of integration in southern communities at the time, it did directly affect DoD policy in the 1960s under Robert S. McNamara and the struggle to provide fair treatment off-base for black servicemen, making additional impacts on integration within American society.

With increased leverage as a voting bloc, African-American advocacy groups expanded their political and legal influence. Their increasing organizational presence allowed them to provide greater support for emerging networks, especially in the South. While black veterans organized throughout the country, the networks had greater implications in the South because of the relative isolation for some black communities and the type of violent intimidation that more frequently characterized southern areas. Their military background and increased educational opportunities left black veterans uniquely suited to deal with this type of situation: poised to infiltrate communities with the greatest need for an educated leadership, but a leadership attuned to the specific problems of those locales. The combination of advocacy and understanding led to increased organizational presence in many previously out-of-reach areas.

The black press publicized the veterans and their actions in important respects. Throughout the war, the black press highlighted African-American achievement within the military and the injustices that segregation and racism imposed upon them. Its advocacy and exposure continued into the postwar period, as journalists criticized the violence and other abuses and discrimination against black veterans. As the press covered the postwar struggles, it habitually emphasized the veteran status of those involved. It used the legitimacy and prominence of military service to broadcast the disparity between American democracy and American practice. On occasion they (perhaps mistakenly) described non-veterans as veterans, liberally using the title to present a starker contrast. This promotion of black military achievement largely fell flat, as much of that record was later obscured. Some of the larger advocacy groups also conducted vigorous publicity campaigns. The efforts combined contributed not only to a more informed black public, heightening the sense of outrage within the black community, but to a scathing portrayal of American hypocrisy on the international stage.

Lastly, while African Americans could only take advantage of the G.I. Bill of Rights to a limited extent, it still represented one of the largest public assistance programs in U.S. history. The bill theoretically afforded veterans with the means for greater social and economic mobility. No comparable opportunity existed prior to this period, and if its effect on the black community was limited in terms of sheer numbers, it still offered critical support to many. It opened doors for some black veterans they might otherwise never have obtained: education, voting privileges or means (hypothetically), and the social and economic position, like business or housing loans, to assist others within the black community.<sup>16</sup> When black veterans failed to obtain these promised benefits, it highlighted the hypocrisy inherent in the country and further angered the veterans. Soldier John David Jackson, refused for a housing loan, fumed that had he seen the administrator who approved a white veteran at the same time, he “would have killed him.”<sup>17</sup>

The setting provided the framework that made their experiences and activism relevant and distinctive in this postwar moment. Partially because of this context, and partially because of their unique experiences in the Second World War, black veterans employed new styles of activism and produced different results. Their political action rippled outward. The African-American veterans of World War II acted as the vanguard of the coming civil rights movement. Their actions were not isolated, and as historians of the long civil rights movement point out, the movement’s roots reached much further back.<sup>18</sup> Revolutionary transformations consist of

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<sup>16</sup> This should not overstate the extent to which black veterans could take advantage of veterans’ voting privileges, but means to imply that for those physically able to take advantage of the vote, their exemption from the poll tax theoretically placed them in a better position than non-veteran African Americans.

<sup>17</sup> John David Jackson, interview by Paul LaRue, Sarah Smith, and Jennifer Ortlieb, John David Jackson Collection (AFC/2001/001/38452), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

<sup>18</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (2005); Glenda Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 2008); Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, “Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement,” *Journal of American History* 75, no 3 (1988); Beth

particular preconditions or underlying structures in tension, precipitants to fuel the change, and catalysts.<sup>19</sup> If a long civil rights movement established certain preconditions such as labor models, and sparks like the Emmett Till murder or the Montgomery Bus Boycott initiated the formal movement, then the veterans provided some of that middle ground. They existed as precipitants to a revolution. When they arrived home, put their abilities to work, and insisted upon certain rights, they terrified some white Americans. The initial backlash of 1946 eventually subsided, and black veterans constructed their networks, challenged, and agitated for change. Their advocacy and successes acted as one factor that prompted ebbs and flows in white backlash.

When the next generation moved forward, veterans acted as teachers, mentors, and guides.<sup>20</sup> They introduced the younger generation to these networks and provided them with wider access to those that needed the most assistance. The veterans bridged a gap between the older generation of black activists and the youth that played such a prominent role in the 1960s. With a more militant disposition in the late 1940s and into the 1950s, they reshaped civil rights activism. As they established themselves educationally, socially, and economically, they prepared to wage the monumental legal and political battles for groups like the NAACP in later years. Their anger, new consciousness, and military service redirected black activism, and the veterans frequently clashed with the older generation of activists.

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Tompkins Bates, *Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics in Black America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

<sup>19</sup> Wayne Lee, "The French Revolution," (lecture, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC, March 26, 2013).

<sup>20</sup> Charles Payne described the way that Amzie Moore introduced "[Robert] Moses to his extensive network, much of which would have been invisible to white people," as one example of the then older generation of activists, that World War II generation, contributing to the youth expansion of the movement in the 1960s. Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 106.

In the future, their leadership roles as a new generation of activists would shift perceptions of African Americans in important respects, sometimes productive and sometimes destructive. Some of their actions produced additional negative stereotypes about African-American men. The increased militancy and refusal to bend to white intimidation reified the notion of the hyper-masculine black male, a categorization with damaging implications. Refusal to take work they felt beneath their skills or capabilities, rampant unemployment for black males in particular through no fault of their own, also contributed to destructive stereotypes about black masculinity. Yet in other respects, they emerged as leaders in the black community and outside of that community. Black veterans had opportunities to shift social perceptions on a larger scale. When William Robert Ming became the first black president of the AVC in 1957, he occupied a place above a number of white veterans. Similarly, on a smaller scale, drill sergeant George Kidd spent his career in the U.S. Marine Corps. In the 1950s, when the Marine Corps integrated, Kidd began training mixed classes of marines, instructing blacks and whites. For Kidd, a sharecropper from Louisiana, the experience demonstrated to him that he had the capabilities to lead, "I found out I could do as good or better . . . as anybody."<sup>21</sup> The younger generation found it increasingly less extraordinary to see mixed black and white student groups. Their behaviors normalized certain sights and understandings, unbalancing that delicate social construction W.E.B. Du Bois described in the South.

Yet for their fearlessness and abilities, at that time the veterans faced consequences for their conscious and unconscious transgressions. They bore criticism, abuse, and invisibility for their actions. Even for those black veterans who did not rebel, reveal their anger, mobilize, arm themselves, or protest, they had already broken the rules. A black man in U.S. military uniform: the image challenged gendered and racial norms and set the social hierarchy off-balance. It

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<sup>21</sup> George Kidd, interview by Sarah Barksdale, 7 Nov 2011, Fort Washington, MD.

confused and defied the social order, and those resisting that social change sought to repress the image, memory, and history of the black veterans' war. As Bigger Thomas of Richard Wright's *Native Son* complained, white society sought to "kill you before you die." In making black veterans invisible, they sought to do just that. For a time, those efforts proved successful. But although the black veterans remained invisible in history for a time, what they accomplished as individuals and as leaders in the 1940s and 1950s left an imprint on the path of the movement. Their actions accelerated momentum for change within the black community, bridged a gap, and spurred on the coming of a revolution.

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