

FIGHTING FOR THE RIGHT TO FIGHT

AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCES IN WWII

Introductory Essay

Racial inequality was deeply ingrained in wartime America. **Segregation**, the system of separating people based on race in schools, transportation, public accommodations, and/or housing, was common throughout much of the country. In the South, where nearly 80 percent of African Americans lived before the war, so-called **Jim Crow laws** divided almost every aspect of life – from schools and streetcars to restrooms and recreational facilities – along racial lines. Segregation also flourished in other regions, thanks in part to the Supreme Court’s endorsement of the practice in its landmark 1896 decision in **Plessy v. Ferguson**. While that ruling established the idea of **separate but equal**, segregated facilities for blacks rarely received equivalent resources as those for whites.

Southern states also denied African Americans their constitutional **right to vote**, and **racial violence** and **employment discrimination** threatened black lives and livelihoods across the United States. Between 1918 and 1941, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) recorded at least 544 lynchings of African Americans. On the eve of World War II, African Americans also had an unemployment rate twice that of whites and a median income that was one-third of the average family.

African Americans confronted these inequalities by building strong communities and institutions and by pursuing opportunities for greater freedom wherever and however they could. Writers and activists such as **W.E.B. Du Bois** advocated for the protection of African Americans’ rights, while others such as labor leader **A. Philip Randolph** organized black workers to gain economic and political equality.

As World War II erupted, African Americans also faced discrimination in defense industries and the military. In 1940, fewer than 250 of the more than 100,000 workers in the expanding aircraft industry were black, and some companies made clear that they would not hire blacks, regardless of their qualifications. The US Marine Corps and the Army Air Corps (renamed the US Army Air Forces in 1941) also barred blacks from service. While the US Army and US Navy accepted a limited number of African Americans, the Army segregated black soldiers into separate units while the Navy confined them to service positions as cooks and stewards.

Pressure from the NAACP and others led the War Department to pledge in the fall of 1940 that the army would receive African Americans according to their percentage in the population as a whole. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt issued additional directives to the military to increase opportunities for black enlistment following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, and the Air Forces and Marines began accepting African Americans in 1941 and 1942, respectively. Yet even as African American numbers grew dramatically in all branches of the service, the proportion of African Americans in the wartime military never reached the 10.6% of blacks within the nation’s overall population.

While most African Americans serving at the beginning of WWII were assigned to non-combat units and relegated to service duties, such as supply, maintenance, and transportation, their work behind front lines was equally vital to the war effort. Many drove for the famous **Red Ball Express**, which

carried a half million tons of supplies to the advancing First and Third Armies through France. By 1945, however, troop losses pushed the military to increasingly place African American troops into positions as infantrymen, pilots, tankers, medics, and officers. The all-black **761st Tank Battalion**, for instance, fought its way through France with the Third Army. They spent 183 days in combat and were credited with capturing 30 major towns in France, Belgium, and Germany. For this, the 761st Tank Battalion received the Presidential Unit Citation for “extraordinary heroism.”

The Army Air Forces also established several African American fighter and bomber units. The pilots of the 99th Fighter Squadron, and later the 332nd Fighter Group, became the symbol of African American participation during World War II, despite being one of the smallest black units of the war. Bomber crews often requested to be escorted by these **Tuskegee Airmen**, who were responsible for destroying 111 enemy planes in the air and 150 on the ground during the war.

While African Americans served with as much honor, distinction, and courage as any other American soldier, the government was often painfully slow to recognize their contributions to the war effort. No African American soldier received the Medal of Honor for his WWII service until after a 1995 government-commissioned report concluded that discrimination marred the awards process. By the time President Bill Clinton awarded the Medal of Honor to seven African American WWII veterans in 1997, only one of those men was still living.

During the war, black protest also yielded significant, if mixed, results on the Home Front. In 1941, A. Philip Randolph cancelled a threatened **March on Washington** after Roosevelt signed **Executive Order 8802**, which banned racial discrimination in war industries and established a **Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC)** tasked with investigating workplace inequality. Employment discrimination persisted, and the African Americans flocking to cities for war production jobs often faced significant hostility, most notably during **wartime riots** in Detroit and Los Angeles in 1943. But blacks nevertheless advanced within the industrial economy. By April 1944, African Americans comprised eight percent of the nation’s defense workers. The massive wartime migration of African Americans out of the South also reshaped the nation’s cities and its postwar political order.

Many African Americans also viewed the war as an opportunity to fight for a **Double Victory** over racism at home and facism abroad. Twenty-six-year-old James G. Thompson proposed the idea of a Double Victory in a 1942 letter to the editor of the black-owned *Pittsburgh Courier*, and the *Courier* soon introduced a **Double V** icon, which it displayed prominently in its pages for months. Throughout much of 1942, the *Courier* also vigorously promoted a Double V campaign by running regular Double V-related photos and stories and by encouraging its 140,000 subscribers to form Double V clubs. By 1943, however, the *Courier* had mostly ended its Double V campaign.

After the war, President Harry S. Truman created the President’s Committee on Civil Rights (PCCR) in response to increased reports of violence against black veterans and a resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan. The committee looked at the service of African American men and women in World War II, and in 1948 Truman acted on the committee’s recommendations by drafting **Executive Orders 9980 and 9981**, banning segregation in the federal government and ordering the integration of the armed forces. Profoundly unpopular in many quarters, these were groundbreaking moves toward reform directly based on African American service in World War II. While some integrated units served in the Korean War, the US Army did not deploy a truly integrated force until the Vietnam War.

African Americans served bravely in every theater of World War II, while simultaneously struggling for their own civil rights at home and fighting against discrimination – and for the right to fight – within the military. The National WWII Museum honors their contributions.