

BLACK SOLDIERS IN THE UNITED STATES, A HISTORY OF HONOR AND VALOR

African Americans have participated in every United States war and have been major contributors to the world's greatest democracy.

The first martyr in the American Revolutionary war was a black man, Crispus Attucks who was killed in Boston by British soldiers in 1770. The memorial to the Boston Massacre is located at Boston's Old State House. When the war began, the British recruited black soldiers by promising them their freedom from slavery. This and manpower shortages caused George Washington to lift the ban on black enlistment in the Continental Army in January 1776. All black units came from Rhode Island, Massachusetts and Haiti. Black volunteers also served in South Carolina guerilla units. There were many Revolutionary black heroes and patriots. Salem Poor, for example, fought in the Massachusetts Militia and killed British Lieutenant Colonel Abercrombie at the Battle of Bunker Hill in June 1775 helping to turn the tide of the battle; he also served with honor at Valley Forge, White Plains, Saratoga and Monmouth.

African Americans also contributed to the War of 1812. About 25% of personnel in the American naval squadrons at the Battle of Lake Erie, and about 15 – 20% of American naval forces in general, were black even though the U.S. Army, but for Louisiana, prohibited black enlistment from 1792 – 1862. Black soldiers served on privateers and warships and contributed significantly to the U.S. victories on Lake Erie and Lake Champlain, giving the U.S. inroads into Canada, and in the Battle of New Orleans. African Americans also contributed to the Mexican American War from 1846 – 1848.

Approximately 200,000 African Americans served in the Civil War. By mid-1862, the number of white volunteers so declined and those of blacks who escaped North so increased, and the war effort so depended upon it, that Congress passed the 2nd Confiscation and Militia Act on July 17, 1862, slavery was abolished in the U.S. territories and Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. African Americans served in artillery, infantry and all noncombat support roles. Black soldiers fought with distinction at Milliken's Bend, Port Hudson, Petersburg and Nashville and 16 were awarded the Medal of Honor. The 54th Massachusetts Regiment lost 50% of their troops at Fort Wagner. A monument to the 54th sits in front of the State House in Boston. At the end of the Civil War, the army formed 2 black cavalry - the 9th and 10th - and 4 black infantry regiments, the 38th, 39th, 40th and 41st. About 40,000 African Americans lost their lives. The black infantry regiments were merged into the 24th and 25th in 1869 and later famously became known as the Buffalo Soldiers who served with distinction through pioneer days on the U.S. frontier.

African Americans served in the Indian Wars from the 1860s through the 1890s and in the Spanish-American War of 1898, where 5 more black soldiers were awarded the Medal of Honor. African Americans served in the regular army plus 5 black voluntary Army units and 7 National Guard units. African Americans also served in U.S. expeditions into Mexico and in the Philippine-American War.

At the start of WWI, the U.S. standing army was only 126,000 men, making necessary the 1917 Selective Service Act. Initially, the War Department imposed a quota on black volunteers who could serve in addition to the 4 black regiments. The draft, however, inducted 13% blacks. The War Department created 2 black combat units, the 92nd and 93rd, and the Army operated a segregated, officer training camp at Fort Des Moines commissioning 639 captains or 1st or 2nd lieutenants. Approximately 700 more blacks served as officers commissioned by training camps in Puerto Rico, the Philippines, Hawaii, Panama and in the U.S. The 93rd fought under Gen. John Pershing, and its 369th infantry fought bravely in France against German assaults near the Argonne Forest and Minacourt and earned the name "Harlem Hellfighters." The 370th, 371st and 372nd also proved themselves in the front lines. Nearly 200 black soldiers earned the French Croix de Guerre, Legion of Honor or Distinguished Service Cross. The 92nd suffered 1,647 casualties and the 93rd 3,534. By the time of the armistice with Germany in 1918, over 350,000 African Americans had served with the American Expeditionary Force on the Western Front. General Mariano Goybet was posthumously awarded a Medal of Honor, as were Corporal Freddie Stowers and Sergeant Henry Johnson.

Between World War I and World War II, African Americans gave assistance to Ethiopia in its effort to resist colonization by Fascist Italy in money, medical supplies and volunteering to fight. African Americans also volunteered to fight for Republican Spain in the Spanish Civil War.

By 1945, more than 1.2 million African Americans were serving in uniform in the U.S., Europe and the Pacific during WWII. Notably, approximately 400,000 women also served in WWII. Lacking troop replacements, President Eisenhower allowed 2000 black volunteers to fight in segregated platoons in the midst of the Battle of the Bulge in late 1944. Though initially segregated and assigned to noncombat units, troop losses forced the U.S. Military to assign black soldiers as infantry, pilots, tankers, medics and officers, which roles they served with honor and distinction. The Tuskegee Airmen flew more than 15,000 sorties, the 761st Tank Battalion with Patton's Third Army was credited with capturing 30 major towns in France, Belgium and Germany, and the 452nd Anti-Aircraft Artillery Battalion proved to be so valuable that President Truman desegregated the armed forces in July 1948. Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. commanded the Tuskegee Airmen and became the first black general in the U.S. Air Force; Doris Miller earned the Navy Cross for his bravery at Pearl Harbor; the Golden Thirteen became the Navy's first black commissioned officers and Frederick C. Branch became the first black U.S. Marine Corps officer. In 1997, President Clinton awarded the Medal of Honor to 7 black WWII veterans, 6 posthumously with only Vernon Baker still living. Black soldiers raised national consciousness that WWII was a "Double V" campaign, fighting both enemies overseas and racism at home. Black soldiers helped lay the groundwork for the Civil Rights Movement

Notwithstanding Truman's executive order, all black Army units persisted into the Korean War until 1954 within which 2 more black soldiers posthumously received the Medal of Honor.

African Americans were over-represented in hazardous duty and combat in the Vietnam War, and suffered disproportionately high casualty rates. More than 20 black soldiers earned the Medal of Honor, including 3 Green Berets. Lawrence Joel, for example, a Vietnam medic, saved the lives of ambushed U.S. troops by traveling through the jungle under heavy fire and was shot twice despite

orders that he stay grounded. Captain Riley Leroy Pitts, while pinned with his unit in the jungle under heavy fire, grabbed an enemy grenade and threw it back, when the grenade bounced back, he fell on it, the grenade did not explode, however, Captain Pitts was killed instantly by a rocket-propelled grenade. Let us remember Captain Pitts as we honor Dedham's own John A. Barnes, III for his similar sacrifice of his life for others.

Black soldiers served with great distinction and leadership in the Gulf War, Desert Storm. General Colin Powell was the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Lieutenant Calvin Waller, the deputy commander of Desert Storm. Blacks made up over 20 % of U.S. troops in the Gulf consisting of approximately 30% of the Army, 22% of the Navy, 17 % of front line Marines and 13% of the Air Force. Black women were nearly 50% of the enlisted women in the Army. Approximately 30,000 women served in the Gulf War. Many black soldiers volunteered from areas with above average incomes and education. Militarily, Desert Storm proved to be one of America's most swift, integrated and co-ed, efficiently planned and fought, and victorious wars. The military proved to be a better equalizer of opportunity than U.S. civilian society.

The history of black military service is astonishing. Throughout American history, blacks fought valiantly to better their own lives and to make America true to its creed even as they fought slavery, racism and every indignity at home as well as in the military. With the greatest of pride and appreciation, be sure this Veterans Day holiday season to extend the familiar gratitude to our black soldiers: "THANK YOU FOR YOUR SERVICE" and for giving our Bill of Rights meaning.

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