

Artillery Soldiers stand by and check their equipment during convoy in Belgium, November 4, 1944 (U.S. Army Signal Corps/Library of Congress)

Absent From the Front

What the Case of the Missing World War II Black Combat Soldier Can Teach Us About Diversity and Inclusion

By Bryon Greenwald

The prevailing view of the U.S. Army's White civilian and military leadership during World War II was that Black Soldiers were ineffective—that is, they "couldn't fight."

Although this assessment was obviously inaccurate, leadership wanted to maintain segregation and, despite a Presidential order to the contrary, took several administrative actions to prevent the organization and deployment of African-American combat units. While this article highlights the value of inclusion in changing perceptions and overcoming bias in the Army during World War II, its example points the way for today's larger defense establishment as it struggles to recruit enough young men and women into its ranks annually. These recruits will be more diverse in race,

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ethnicity, religion, and sexual orientation than their World War II predecessors. Many, however, will face similar prejudicial attitudes about their value to the force simply because they are seen to be in some way different. Appreciating the value of inclusion and how the mixing of racially different groups of Soldiers in World War II changed the attitudes of those White and Black troops encourages us to provide the same opportunity today.

Over 12 million Americans, including 900,000 African Americans, served in the World War II Army. While hundreds of thousands of Blacks deployed in over a thousand units to North Africa, Italy, Europe, and the Pacific, very few—only 3 percent of African-American units—were combat outfits, and even fewer engaged in combat. Why was there such a lack of proportional representation when even President Franklin Delano Roosevelt directed that 10 percent of all Army units would be Black?[1]

Immediately, the answer seems obvious. First, African Americans made up approximately 10 percent of the American population, but in 1940, 75 years after the Civil War and constitutional amendments abolishing slavery and establishing equality and the right to vote, the White American majority still did not consider Blacks as their equals in fighting spirit (or anything else).[2]

Second, while great strides had been made in the education of the Black population since the Civil War, and especially since World War I, the lingering effects of segregation, economic and social marginalization, and access to quality schools meant that Black intelligence, as measured by the Army General Classification Test, lagged behind that of Whites and reinforced U.S. military leaders' belief that Blacks were not smart enough to fight a modern war.[3]

Third, these beliefs dovetailed with conflicted attitudes and tensions of racial subordination and superordination within the disequilibrated system of race relations present in American society at the time. And because the World War II Army consisted of mostly White men with decades of socially sanctioned prejudice ingrained in their psyche, the World War II Army systematically discriminated against African Americans and established an apartheid-like segregation of Black Servicemembers despite Presidential directives to do otherwise. While publicly the national attitude toward Blacks and other minorities may have been "separate but equal" as decided in Plessy *v.* Ferguson (1896), the Army treated Black men and Black units as "unequal and keep separate."

In short, as far as the U.S. military was concerned, World War II was a White man's war; others need not apply.

Eye Opening

To understand this situation, however, requires some historical perspective. Despite African Americans having served with distinction in every war since the Revolution, when Congress passed the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940, there were 4,435 Black enlisted men, 5 commissioned officers, and 11 warrant officers in an Army of 269,023.[4] Shortly thereafter, more than 2.5 million African Americans registered for the draft in 1940, and about half were inducted, 75 percent of whom went into the Army.[5] During the war, the Army referred to the over 901,896 African Americans that served as "Negro personnel" and segregated them into "colored" outfits, which were delineated in some Army records by the parenthetical (Colored) or the abbreviation (Cld), as in 452nd Antiaircraft Artillery (Automatic Weapons) Battalion (Colored) or 452nd AAA (AW) Bn (Cld).[6] By modern standards, this policy seems extremely outdated, but it reflected the societal attitudes and norms of the time toward anyone but White people.

While not to the same degree, the Army treated women and other minorities similarly.[7] The prevailing attitude was that White men made the best Soldiers and should provide the preponderance of combat forces. To the extent that Blacks—or Hispanics, Filipinos, or women—entered the force, it was both the result of political pressure and to relieve White men of less meaningful tasks, so they could fight at the front. The Army had no issue with enlisting Blacks, Filipinos, or Puerto Ricans if they were in separate units. In fact, in 1940–1941, with the Japanese occupying northern Indochina (today Vietnam) and preparing for a likely war with the United States, the Army went so far as to refuse to allow Filipinos to enlist except in the Philippine Scouts or in units stationed in the Philippines that would accept them.[8] *Los Borinqueños* were sent to units in Puerto Rico, such as the 123rd Antiaircraft Artillery (Gun) Battalion, which the Army formed out of a Puerto Rican National Guard Coast Artillery Regiment and moved between Puerto Rico and Trinidad during the war.[9] The largest and most politically active group, however, was African Americans.

At its peak in June 1945, the Army totaled 8,266,373 men, of which 694,818 (9.33 percent) were Black.[10] During the war years, African Americans represented about 10 percent of the U.S. population. At a Cabinet meeting on September 13, 1940, President Roosevelt stated his desire to have Black Soldiers proportionally represented in all Army unit types. The next day, Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall dutifully directed Brigadier General William E. Shedd III, the Army G1, to prepare a summary of the Service's ability to comply with the President's directive.[11]

Two weeks later, at a meeting with Black political leaders including A. Philip Randolph, head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, which Roosevelt unintentionally recorded, the President reiterated his position: "We are not, as you saw so much in the World War, confining the Negro into the non-combat services. We're putting 'em right in, proportionally, into the combat services." To the question of African Americans having "their own divisions and regiments, and the opportunity to prove their value," Roosevelt suggested that White and Black regiments "in the same division" and artillery batteries working near each other would coalesce organically. "After a while, in case of war, those people get shifted from one to the other. The thing gets sort of backed into. You have one battery out of a regiment of artillery . . . that would be

a Negro battery, with a White battery at the end, maybe a nearby battery . . . and, gradually working in the field together, you may back into it [integrated units]."[12]

Roosevelt's desire for proportional representation notwithstanding, lower education levels, the lack of Black leaders to serve as noncommissioned officers and officers, and prejudicial attitudes about the worthiness of Black units prevented the Army from reaching this goal until December 1945, 4 months after the Japanese surrender.[13] These factors—education, leadership, and prejudicial attitudes—also influenced the distribution of Black Servicemen among the Army's various branches, driving the allocation of African Americans out of combat units (armor, cavalry, coast/antiaircraft artillery, field artillery, and infantry) and into service branches. For the reasons mentioned, there were few Black combat units. Historians, however, tend to understate the extent to which the Army purposely assigned African Americans to noncombat and support units. Even the most authoritative sources, including the National World War II Museum and Matthew Delmont's Guggenheim and National Endowment for the Humanities–supported study, *Half American: The Epic Story of African Americans Fighting World War II at Home and Abroad*, note that "most" African Americans served in noncombat units.[14] As the following demonstrates, those estimates do not come close to recognizing how few African-American combat troops there really were.

History Revised

The discovery of the Army's July 1945 station list of all Colored units demolishes any claim by the Army of meeting Roosevelt's 10 percent distribution of Blacks across combat, combat support, and Service units.[15] A station list is a list of units by location. The Army kept monthly records, generally by theater. In June 1945, 73.4 percent of African Americans serving in the Army were overseas, compared with 63.4 percent of the Army's total strength.[16] An analysis of the 150-page station list confirms that not "the bulk" or "a majority" but virtually all African Americans ended the war in service units. First, theater commanders converted some units—infantry regiments of the 92nd and 93rd Infantry Divisions, antiaircraft battalions, and others—to noncombat duties. Second, 95 percent of all Black units deployed overseas were service units.[17]

Third, when one looks beyond infantry, armor, and artillery outfits to units often assumed to be combat units by their nomenclature—for example, engineers and aviators—and examines those units by their table of organization and equipment, only a few Black engineer units (15 of 325) were combat engineers or bridging units, and only 4 of 43 Black aviation units flew airplanes. Most Black Soldiers drove trucks that moved the unit's aviation support equipment. Indeed, page after page of this station list documents African-American truck companies, salvage battalions, laundry and bath detachments, stevedores, and supply units. And while their contribution in service and support tasks was critical to the war effort, digging ditches, unloading ships, or driving supply trucks (even the famed Red Ball Express) do not make for rousing historical narratives, nor did it change the view of most White Soldiers about the value of Black Soldiers.

Combat Brings Opportunities for Inclusion

Given the influence of segregation on their Army experience, Black Soldiers, unlike their White counterparts, focused more on equality than on winning the war. In March 1943, when asked, "Do you think this war is as much your affair as it is anybody else's?" 86 percent White and 66 percent Black Soldiers matched by education, region of origin, and branch of Service responded yes. When asked if they were "fighting to protect free speech for everyone," White Soldiers responded very positively (90 percent), Blacks less so (70 percent). When polled about what they might ask the President, 50 percent of African-American Soldiers stated they would ask about racial discrimination; less than 0.5 percent of White Soldiers responded similarly. Finally, and most important, to the question, "Do you think that most Negroes are being given a fair chance to do as much as they want to do to help win the war?" a majority of Blacks answered no (54 percent), 35 percent answered yes, and 11 percent were undecided. White Soldiers saw things differently, responding overwhelmingly yes (76 percent), with 12 percent answering no and 12 percent undecided.[18] This vast difference in perception seen in the last question clearly stemmed from preconceived ideas about the worthiness of Black Soldiers, their purposeful segregation, and the task or duty separation that limited the ability of Black and White Soldiers to interact in a meaningful manner. This perspective carried over to how African Americans thought about serving in the same outfit or unit as Whites. Of 3,000 Blacks surveyed in March 1943, 37 percent indicated that "they should be in separate outfits," while 36 percent opted to "be together in the same outfits." Of that latter group, 15 percent voiced statements about democracy and equality and 5 percent believed that closer association would bring improved understanding between the races. Similarly, of those Blacks opting for separate outfits, 13 percent indicated it was due to the existence of prejudice that drove their choice. In other words, if the prejudice did not exist, they might have chosen "same outfit" instead.[19]

When researchers asked that same question of 4,800 White enlisted men, 84 percent responded that they wanted to be in separate outfits; only 12 percent stated that Blacks and Whites should serve in mixed units together. Some (14 percent), however, qualified their "separate" vote by including statements suggesting that expediency during wartime drove their belief; 7 percent were concerned that intermingling would lead to friction and trouble.[20]

Researchers conducted these surveys of men who were out of combat and in some cases had not yet deployed overseas. After being in close combat, fighting for their very lives side by side with Black Soldiers, White opinions changed significantly. Using a framework developed



Soldiers of 92nd Infantry Division operate mortar near Massa, Italy, November 1944 (U.S. Army/National Archives and Records Administration)

by the author, three examples from the campaign against Germany show how White Soldiers went from *admiring* Black Soldiers in the performance of their duties to *desiring* their assistance to *requiring* their help to stay alive and win the war.[21]

Admiring. Take, for example, the experience of White infantrymen and others watching the Black men of the 320th Anti-Aircraft Barrage Balloon Battalion, VLA (Very Low Altitude), operating on Omaha and Utah beaches. The 320th Battalion was one of four Black barrage balloon battalions and the only battalion of its type (White or Black) to deploy to combat not once, but twice: first to Normandy on D-Day, June 6, 1944, within four hours of the assault, and then to the Pacific. The men of this battalion were the first Black Soldiers and the first Black combat unit to set foot in France. Their mission was to float several 35-foot-long balloons or "silver sausages" to an altitude of 2,000 feet and create an aerial hazard to either snare unsuspecting enemy aircraft or force them to higher altitudes where Army antiaircraft units or pursuit planes could engage them. Despite being under continuous artillery and machine gun fire, the battalion got its balloons aloft, sometimes grabbing the wire tether and maneuvering them by hand.

Along with the other Black balloon battalions, the 320th Battalion was a "source of tremendous pride for black America" and received frequent coverage in both the African-American and the White press. When it left France after 140 days, the 320th had destroyed one Junker JU-88 and possibly two other German aircraft and received a commendation from General Dwight Eisenhower for its service at Omaha Beach. Moreover, the 320th captured the attention of Servicemembers across Europe and changed some, if not all, minds about the ability of African-American Soldiers. As Bill Richardson, a military correspondent on Eisenhower's staff, noted, "It seems the whole front knows the story of the Negro barrage balloon battalion outfit which was one of the first ashore on D-day. [They] have gotten the reputation of hard workers and good Soldiers. Their simple earnestness and pride . . . [are] obvious to some of the most Jim Crow–conscious southerners."[22]

One Black Soldier, however, beat even the first Black balloon crew to Normandy. Corporal Waverly Woodson, Jr., a medic from Philadelphia, was temporarily detached from his battalion and assigned to an early arriving landing craft, tank (LCT), with the 29th Infantry Division to treat wounded Soldiers regardless of



Soldier with 12th Armored Division stands guard over group of Nazi prisoners, April 1945 (National Archives and Records Administration)

color. As Woodson's LCT approached Omaha Beach around 9:00 a.m., it struck a mine that disabled the motor and hit another mine that tore into the hull. An artillery round then landed in the jeep on deck, killing several men. Woodson suffered shrapnel wounds to the leg, his first of two, and soon found himself struggling to get out of the frigid water and ashore. Once on the fire-swept beach, he quickly set up an aid station and treated 200 wounded and dying Soldiers. Even after being relieved at 4:00 p.m. on June 7, after 30 hours of continuous action, Woodson gave artificial respiration to three White Soldiers who had gone underwater during their attempt to land their LCT before he collapsed from his wounds and sheer exhaustion.[23]

Woodson's battalion commander, a White officer, recommended him for the Distinguished Service Cross, the Nation's second highest award. Lieutenant General John C.H. Lee, the deputy commander of U.S. Forces in Europe, believed Woodson deserved the Congressional Medal of Honor and ordered the recommendation revised. Records indicate that the award even reached the White House, but it is lost to history whether the recommendation ever crossed President Roosevelt's desk. Woodson's personnel records burned in a 1973 fire at the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis.

In recent years, some Black men have been belatedly honored, but during World War II Black men did not receive the Medal of Honor. Of the 433 Medals of Honor awarded during the war, none went to African-American Soldiers. In the end, Woodson received the Bronze Star, the Nation's fourth-highest award for valor. Years later, when talking about racial relations and his service on Omaha Beach, Woodson remarked that when men needed aid, "They didn't care what color my skin was."[24]

The same feeling may have existed among other White combat units. White infantrymen and tankers appreciated the labor of Black (and White) men culled from across the force to serve as truck drivers in the Red Ball Express, which provided desperately needed fuel, ammunition, and supplies to forward combat forces as they chased German units across the Seine River following the breakout from Normandy. This situation was another case where White combat troops in the forward areas could appreciate and admire the work done by Blacks and others but did not necessarily need to interact with them in a meaningful way.

Desiring. The strict segregation of African-American Soldiers and units

began to change as combat extended beyond Normandy and approached the German border in the latter part of 1944. Combat conditions in December 1944 in the Ardennes gave rise to the need for greater integration of units but not necessarily individual personnel. Indeed, the exigencies of close combat against the German attack that started on December 16 drove Black and White artillery units closer together than ever before.

In spring 1945, there were 238 separate field artillery battalions in the European theater of operations out of a total of 307 deployed worldwide; 9 of those battalions were Black, and all were in theater.[25] Those nine African-American artillery battalions, less than 3 percent of those in Europe and less than 4 percent of the total, represented the largest concentration of African-American combat power in a single theater of war. Their mere existence and inclusion in combat operations underscored the American preference for overwhelming firepower. For when it came to the desire to pummel the Germans with devastating artillery fire, the Army set aside its prewar concern about having Black battalions and batteries provide artillery fire support for White troops and prioritized its tactical ethos.

Army artillery provided support at several levels. The first and most direct support came from the artillery battalions assigned permanently to an Army division. The next most proximate support came from a battalion or often several battalions attached to an Army division. The third level of support occurred when one or more battalions, often under the command of an artillery group, reinforced the fires of a division's organic artillery battalions. Given the prewar Army's taboo against integrating Black and White units within the division, all nine African-American artillery battalions were assigned to corps artillery commands and organized as part of field artillery groups to reinforce the fires of assigned or attached artillery battalions.

In most cases, Black artillery battalions fought as part of White artillery groups commanded by and consisting of White men. However, several times in the war, White artillery battalions worked under the command of a Black artillery group led by Black officers.[26] And while this mixture of Black and White battalions occurred episodically in Europe, nowhere was this level of unit integration more necessary or the ability of Black and White units to cooperate more critical than during the Battle of the Bulge at the siege of Bastogne.

The European winter of 1944 was one of the coldest in nearly 40 years. Ice-cold rain turned dirt roads into rivers of mud that stopped vehicles in their tracks and then froze them in place when the temperature dropped. As the Allied armies approached Germany, the Ardennes forest, covered in a thick blanket of snow held in place by sub-zero temperatures, was one of the worst places to fight. In May 1940, the Germans attacked through what the French believed was the impenetrable Ardennes forest, overwhelmed a surprised French force, and reached the English Channel in weeks. In December 1944, Hitler intended to repeat the feat, slice through a weakly defended area of the Allied line, destroy the U.S. First and Ninth Armies and the British 21st Army Group, and recapture the port of Antwerp.

At 5:30 a.m. on December 16, the first of up to 27 German armor and infantry divisions—200,000 men in total—attacked across a 60-mile front, catching 83,000 men in six untested or refitting American divisions, most belonging to the VIII U.S. Corps, completely by surprise.[27] Over the next 3 days, American divisions managed to hold the northern and southern shoulders and delay the German main thrust in the center. While bitter combat occurred throughout the salient, the battle devolved into an all-out fight in the very compartmented terrain to hold bridges and major road junctions—in particular, the junction of several major roads at Bastogne.

In December 1944, VIII Corps divisions received reinforcing artillery fires from several organizations, including the 333rd Field Artillery (FA) Group (Colored). The 333rd FA Group consisted of two Black artillery battalions—the 333rd FA Battalion and the 969th FA Battalion, both equipped with 12 155mm howitzers—and the 771st FA Battalion, a White battalion armed with 4.5-inch guns. Over December 16–17, the German onslaught overran elements of the 106th Infantry Division and portions of the supporting 333rd FA Battalion and drove them to the west. In the process of retreating, the 333rd FA Battalion lost seven of its guns and most of its Soldiers, including 11 Soldiers massacred in Wereth, Belgium, by men from the German 1st SS Panzer Division.[28]

Meanwhile, Eisenhower sent one of his two theater reserve divisions, the 101st Airborne Division—3 weeks removed from the failed attempt to bounce the Rhine in Operation *Market Garden*—to Bastogne to hold the vital road junction and slow, if not stop, the German attack in the center of the Bulge. To reinforce the division's own artillery, VIII Corps placed the 333rd FA Group headquarters and the 969th FA and 771st FA battalions under the command of the 101st Division Artillery led by Brigadier General Anthony McAuliffe, who by happenstance was also the acting division commander as Major General Maxwell Taylor was out of the area.[29]

As the 101st Airborne Division moved by truck to Bastogne, the Germans attacked from the east, north, and south, forcing U.S. units to retreat toward the town. By December 20, the 333rd FA Battalion, having suffered a direct attack by German panzers, had lost 2 additional howitzers, for a 4-day total of 9 guns, 34 trucks, 12 weapons carriers, and 6 officers and 222 men, either as casualties or prisoners. The remnants of the battalion folded into the 969th FA Battalion, the other Black artillery battalion, now in the vicinity of Bastogne. Concurrently, direct German pressure on the White cannoneers of the 771st FA Battalion drove most of the Soldiers off, leaving just 6 officers and 14 Soldiers to man two of their 4.5-inch guns. The 969th FA Battalion took control of these guns, creating a composite battalion, and the 20 remaining men of the 771st FA Battalion joined the 333rd Field Artillery Group headquarters. By the afternoon of December 21, with Bastogne now surrounded, the 969th FA

Battalion was the only medium artillery to back up the division's light 105mm howitzers inside the half-mile-wide defensive perimeter.[30]

From December 21 to 26, the Germans surrounded Bastogne. Some of the artillerymen were within 500 yards of the frontlines. Artillery rounds, however, were in such short supply that the 969th FA Battalion only fired on targets called in by observers. The infantrymen defending the town did not stop to ask what color the cannoneers were when asking for artillery protection—they just asked for help.

Despite the shortages and the constant German artillery, armor, and infantry attacks, cooperation between men and units was superb. Soldiers from the 969th FA Battalion recovered abandoned vehicles, carried messages under fire, and evacuated wounded individuals to aid stations. Several Black men received the Bronze Star for their actions. Some men, identifying with the way Airborne Soldiers wore their uniforms, began tucking their pant legs into their boots. One enterprising 969th Battalion cook, Technician 4 Broman Williams, even set up an improvised mess and fed a thousand men, White and Black, daily. Like the men Waverly Woodson treated at Omaha Beach, the tired, cold, and hungry men of Bastogne did not care who prepared the food, if it was hot.[31]

Just before Christmas, C-47 aircraft began dropping precious supplies and ammunition. At 4:50 p.m. on December 26, the first tank from the 4th Armored Division, attacking from the south, pierced the German lines and entered Bastogne. Before dawn on December 27, American forces had sufficiently cleared both sides of the road leading to town that they now had a relatively secure path to resupply and succor the 101st Airborne Division in the tough fighting that followed.[32]

On January 3, 1945, Major General Taylor arrived with lead elements of the 4th Armored Division and resumed command of the 101st Airborne Division. Taylor wrote to Lieutenant Colonel Hubert D. Barnes, commander of the 969th FA Battalion, thanking them for their "gallant support" in defense of Bastogne, attributing the success to the "shoulder-to-shoulder cooperation of all units involved." He closed by noting that he was recommending the battalion for the Distinguished Unit Citation.[33] On January 11, Major General Troy Middleton, commander of VIII Corps, wrote, "Your contribution to the great success of our arms at Bastogne will take its place among the epic achievements of our Army."[34]

The 969th FA Battalion would leave Bastogne on January 16 to support French and American divisions in the Seventh U.S. Army in the reduction of the Colmar pocket in the Vosges Mountains. In February, along with units of the 101st Division, the battalion received the Distinguished Unit Citation. It was the second Black unit to receive the award.[35] In its 10 months in combat, the 969th FA Battalion fired 42,289 rounds in support of units in all four American Armies and the French army. On May 3, 1945, the battalion was reunited with the 101st Airborne Division, this time supporting the infantrymen by trucking German prisoners to the 101st Division's prisoner of war stockades.[36]

Requiring. Since the relatively light losses during the Normandy landings (2,499 killed in action), U.S. casualties had increased dramatically. Hedgerow fighting had decimated infantry divisions, in some cases resulting in almost 100 percent loss of infantry rifle company strength. By December 8, 1944, General George S. Patton's Third U.S. Army was short 11,000 infantrymen, the equivalent of 55 rifle companies or enough riflemen to fill 2 infantry divisions; Eisenhower's manpower specialists predicted the two major American forces, General Omar Bradley's 12th Army Group and General Jacob Devers's 6th Army Group, would need over 29,000 infantry replacements by the end of the month. The German attack in the Ardennes made a mockery of those estimates.[37]

Hitler's desperate gamble to knock the Allies out of the war in the west failed miserably but caused over 79,000 American casualties and drove the Army to rush replacements from the States and rear area White units. In a bit of inspired leadership, Lieutenant General John C.H. Lee, the commander of American Service troops in England who had earlier recommended Waverly Woodson for the Medal of Honor, approached Eisenhower with the idea to take volunteer Black support troops into the infantry. Already planning to release up to 20,000 White men to undertake infantry and armor training, Lee now wanted to tap his reserves of Black manpower. He had coordinated with Brigadier General Benjamin O. Davis, then special advisor and coordinator to the Theater Commander on Negro Troops, and Brigadier General Henry Marchett, commander of the Ground Force Reinforcement Command, who supported the idea. Lee had even drafted a message to be read to African Americans throughout his command asking them to volunteer and take reductions in rank to private and private first class to fight as individual infantry replacements on the frontlines.

His initial proposal for Black support troops to integrate into White units on an individual basis, however, ran afoul of Eisenhower's chief of staff, Lieutenant General Walter Bedell Smith. He argued that to follow Lee's suggestion would not only violate Army policy but also encourage Blacks and their patrons to push for an end to segregation in the Army. Eisenhower, as was his way, found a middle ground, rewrote Lee's message personally, and issued a request "to all soldiers without regard to color or race" to volunteer for combat assignments.[38]

While originally limited to 2,500 African Americans, 4,562 men came forward, eventually forming 37 overstrength Black rifle platoons, led by White officers and platoon sergeants. At the 16th Reinforcement Depot at Compiegne, France, these men received the same training White men had been undertaking since November 1944. The training staff noted that Black units had lower absenteeism and fewer disciplinary problems than nonvolunteer White Soldiers. After the modest infantry training concluded, Eisenhower's headquarters sent 25 platoons to General Bradley's 12th Army Group, which detailed them to

the First and Ninth Armies and further down through corps to Army divisions, where they fought side by side with White platoons in integrated infantry companies. The other 12 platoons went to 6th Army Group and down to the Seventh Army, where they formed into Black companies and fought in White battalions. A bit later, a second group of 16 platoons arrived, with 12 going to the 12th Army Group and 4 to the 6th Army Group. These units remained infantry outfits until the war ended, whereupon the Army either returned them to their Service unit headquarters or discharged them. The platoons and companies, particularly in the 12th Army Group, won praise from their commanders and from White men in their units.[39]

In the 12th Army Group, which had faced the brunt of the recent German attack, their gaining organizations did their best to welcome the arrival of the Black platoons. Division and assistant division commanders personally greeted them upon arrival, and in some instances, platoons received the division patch and a brief history of the division and regiment they were joining. As for their distribution, the platoons joined both veteran units (1st and 9th Infantry Divisions) and newer units like the 12th and 14th Armored Divisions and the 69th, 78th, 99th, and 104th Infantry Divisions. At least one division not immediately on the offensive put their platoons through additional training. As the assistant division commander of the 104th Division noted, "We wanted to make sure they knew all the tricks of infantry fighting. We assigned our best combat leaders as instructors. I watched those lads training and if ever men were in dead earnest, they were."[40]

The 104th Division was rewarded for the efforts. A divisional report noted, "Their combat record has been outstanding. They have, without exception, proven themselves to be good soldiers." The division G-1 told Brigadier General Davis during an inspection trip:

Morale: Excellent. Manner of performance: Superb. Men are very eager to close with the enemy and to destroy him. Strict attention to duty, aggressiveness, common sense, and judgment under fire has won



Combat Soldiers on patrol near bombed buildings, somewhere in Europe, 1944 (Everett Collection/Alamy)



Soldiers surround farmhouse as they prepare to eliminate German sniper, near Vierville-sur-Mer, France, June 10, 1944 (U.S. Army/National Archives and Records Administration)

the admiration of all the men in the company. . . . The men of Company F all agree that the colored platoon has a caliber of men equal to any veteran platoon.[41]

Black platoons assigned to the 9th and 1st Infantry Divisions were just as effective. One Soldier, Private First Class Jack Thomas, received the Distinguished Service Cross for his actions with the 60th Infantry Regiment, 9th Infantry Division. In the 1st Infantry Division, the most bloodied and experienced division in the Army, the platoons joined the regiments that landed in North Africa and stormed the beach on D-Day. As they fought side by side, the platoons' proficiency climbed dramatically from 30 percent to 80 percent in 2 weeks. When casualties dropped one platoon's strength too low for it to continue as a separate unit, the remaining men joined a White platoon as an infantry squad. In another platoon, when the White platoon sergeant was wounded, a Black infantryman stepped forward, worked closely with the other White platoon sergeants and leaders, and performed "all duties . . . in a superior manner." More directly, a White platoon sergeant from South Carolina stated, "When I heard about it, I said I'd be damned if I'd wear the same shoulder patch they did. After that first day when we saw how they fought, I changed my mind. They are just like any of the other boys to us." In so integrating at all but the individual Soldier level, these men began to reverse centuries of discrimination, bigotry, and racism.[42]

In June 1945, a month after the war in Europe ended, the Army surveyed 255 White company officers, platoon sergeants, and other enlisted men to determine their reaction to fighting in integrated units. The officers, sergeants, and men noted that African-American Soldiers performed well, with 84 percent of the White officers and 81 percent of the sergeants and enlisted men responding "very well" and 16 percent and 17 percent responding "fairly well," respectively. Stated another way, 100 percent of the officers and 98 percent of the enlisted men responded positively that Blacks, fighting side by side with Whites, had performed well. When asked if "with the same Army training and experience, how do you think colored troops would compare with White troops as Infantry Soldiers?" 86 percent of White officers and 92 percent of White platoon sergeants and men stated "just the same" or "better than White troops." Still, almost all officers and men felt that if the Army continued to use Black Soldiers as infantrymen, it should do so in separate platoons, companies, or even battalions.[43]

In a way, while touting the fighting ability of Black Soldiers, these responses confirmed the "equal and separate" policies espoused by the Army and American society at the time. While an emergency

action during war, the integration of Black platoons into White infantry units nonetheless represented a small, if belated, step forward for actual equality. From *admiring* to *desiring* to *requiring* the support of Black Soldiers to win the war, White infantrymen and others in these vignettes gradually came to accept integration when their lives depended on it. And as Roosevelt predicted in 1940, they "backed into it."

With Executive Order 9981 in 1948, President Harry Truman ordered the military to integrate, but it would take the Korean War to force the Army to eliminate separate African-American units and the Vietnam War before it became a cultural reality.[44] Even then, changing attitudes and perceptions was exceedingly difficult. It would take a few more decades before the Army truly integrated Blacks into all levels of the force, from individual squad members to three- and four-star commanders, and longer still before the Defense Department promoted them to positions such as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Secretary of Defense.

Conclusion

So what does "the Case of the Missing World War II Black Combat Soldier" teach us about diversity, equity, and inclusion?

Warfare has always been and will remain a human affair. Despite ever-present improvements in technology and their influence on the conduct of war, the last two decades of conflict in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and now Ukraine only reaffirm this conclusion.

The problem at the onset of World War II and the problem now is that the United States faces a shortage of qualified personnel to populate its Armed Forces. Recent reports highlight the dearth of American youth (18 to 24 years old) capable of meeting the Defense Department's intellectual, physical, and moral standards for service. In 2019, out of 31.8 million military aged youth, 9.1 million met the *minimum* physical, mental, educational, aptitudinal, legal, and drug use qualifications, but only 435,000 were of high academic



Lieutenant General George S. Patton, U.S. Third Army commander, pins Silver Star on Private Ernest A. Jenkins, of New York City, for his conspicuous gallantry in liberation of Châteaudun, France, October 13, 1944 (U.S. Army Signal Corps/National Archives and Records Administration)

quality and were interested in military service.[45] Moreover, civilian corporations worldwide are competing for the same shrinking pool of high school and college graduates. Given this situation, the U.S. military, both as a corporate business and as a combat organization, can ill afford to treat potential employees with disdain, discriminate against them, or exclude them because they are seen as different—for example, in race, ethnicity, gender, religion, or sexual orientation.

In World War II, the U.S. military systematically discriminated against African Americans, shunted those it allowed to serve into noncombat roles, and believed that winning the war was a job for White men only. In the end, particularly in Europe, where the Wehrmacht chewed up battalion after battalion of American GIs in epic defensive battles from Normandy to the Rhine, the Army ran out of fighting White men and had to rush in a hasty infusion of companies and platoons of Black volunteers from Army service forces units to plug the frontlines and continue the fight. This emergency inclusion of African-American troops fighting alongside White infantrymen changed a few attitudes about the fighting abilities and value of Black Servicemen and set the stage for the 1948 Presidential directive to integrate the Armed Forces and start the slow process of structural and cultural integration. Today's force must not repeat the same mistakes; it must capitalize on our national diversity and include individuals from all communities into the defense establishment if we are to maximize our intellectual and physical abilities to defend the Nation and ensure our continued prosperity.

This article highlights the systematic discrimination against Blacks in World War II and through three vignettes showed how the perception of Black Servicemen changed as White men began to associate with them and gradually include them in their combat space, ultimately integrating African-American service troops among White battalions and companies in the later stages of the European campaign. The lesson this article offers for diversity, equity, and inclusion suggests that the assumptions a majority makes about a minority are often wrong, and when they are placed together and required to interact, attitudes can and will change. Actions speak louder than words. Advocates for the creation of African-American combat forces helped initiate steps that led to Black troops being available in Europe and elsewhere, but the act of fighting together, of placing Black platoons and companies within White units, created the opportunity for change to take root. Going forward, we must actively engage in making our organizations better by welcoming all highly qualified and competent Americans into the Armed Forces. We must not settle for President Roosevelt's passive approach. Our humanity, our professional ethics, and our dire personnel (recruiting) situation require us to do more than back into it. **JFQ**

Notes

[1] The first Presidential directive on proportional representation occurred in September 1940. "Reports on presidential intention regarding publicizing Black participation in the services," cited in Morris J. MacGregor and Bernard C. Nalty, eds., *Blacks in the United States Armed Forces: Basic Documents*, vol. 5, *Black Soldiers in World War II* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1977), 25. On June 25, 1941, President Roosevelt also issued Executive Order (EO) 8802, *Reaffirming Policy of Full Participation in the Defense Program by All Persons, Regardless of Race, Creed, Color, or National Origin, and Directing Certain Action in Furtherance of Said Policy* (Washington, DC: The White House, June 25, 1941), which prohibited ethnic or racial discrimination in defense industries. It was amended four times by Roosevelt and Truman: EO 8823 (July 18, 1941), EO 9111 (March 25, 1942), EO 9346 (May 27, 1943), and EO 9964 (December 15, 1945).

[2] Specifically, the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments.

[3] Shirley Star, Robin Williams, and Samuel Stouffer, "Negro Soldiers," in *The American Soldier: Adjustment During Army Life*, vol. 1, ed. S.A. Stouffer et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949), 489–492; Ulysses Lee, *The Employment of Negro Troops* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1966), 244.

[4] "The Negro Soldier," Extension of Remarks by Honorable Helen Gahagan Douglas (D-CA), February 1, 1946, in *Congressional Record* 92, pt. 9, appendix (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office [GPO], 1946), A428–A443.

[5] Michael Lee Lanning, *The African-American Soldier: From Crispus Attucks to Colin Powell* (Secaucus, NJ: Carol Publishing Group, 1997), 173.

[6] For African-American number of 901,896, see "Research Starters: U.S. Military by the Numbers," National World War II Museum, https://www.nationalww2museum.org/students-teachers/student-resources/research-starters/research-starters-us-military-numbers.

[7] Although one will find occasional discussion of African Americans and women where appropriate throughout the Army's multivolume history of World War II, both groups have separate volumes devoted to in-depth coverage of their contributions and the policies surrounding them. See Lee, *The Employment of Negro Troops*; Mattie E. Treadwell, *The Women's Army Corps* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1991). The terms *subordination*, *superordination*, and *disequilibrated* are drawn from Star, Williams, and Stouffer, "Negro Soldiers," 486–487.

[8] Robert K. Griffith, Jr., *Men Wanted for the U.S. Army: America's Experience with an All-Volunteer Army Between the World Wars* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982), 212.

[9] The name *Borinqueños* came from the Puerto Rican island's original name of Boriken, meaning Land of the Brave People, created by the Taino-Arawak people, a highly advanced race dating to 4,000 BCE.

[10] Lee, *The Employment of Negro Troops*, 415.

[11] Douglas MacArthur, "Memorandum, Chief of Staff for General Shedd, 14 September 1940, CCS 20609-79," National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) II; MacGregor and Nalty, *Blacks in the United States Armed Forces*, 25.

[12] "FDR Meets With Black Leaders, Side 1, 1637–1972, September 27, 1940," Transcripts of White House Office Conversations, 8/22/1940–10/10/1940, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, http://docs.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/transcr4.html. See also R.J.C. Butow, "The Story Behind the FDR Tapes," *American Heritage* 33, no. 2 (February–March 1982), https://www.americanheritage.com/story-behind-fdr-tapes#1.

[13] In December 1945, the Army had 367,630 enlisted African Americans on the rolls out of a total of 3,572,577 enlisted men (10.29 percent). When officers are added, the percentage drops to 8.81 percent. See Lee, *The Employment of Negro Troops*, 415.

[14] Matthew F. Delmont, *Half American: The Epic Story of African Americans Fighting World War II at Home and Abroad* (New York: Viking, 2022), viii. For additional examples, the National World War II Museum in New Orleans notes that "most African Americans serving at the beginning of World War II were assigned to non-combat units and relegated to

service duties." One of the best military history texts available also notes that for the reasons mentioned in this article, "most blacks could serve usefully in labor units." See Allan R. Millett, Peter Maslowski, and William B. Feis, *For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States from 1607 to 2012* (New York: Free Press, 2012), 383. Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett's masterful *A War to Be Won: Fighting the Second World War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), a strategic, operational, and industrial history of the war, has an excellent chapter on "Peoples at War" that includes five pages on women in war but mentions Black Servicemen only once in passing despite their numbers eclipsing those of American women in the U.S. Army. Even scholars focused on African-American Soldiers generalize about the numbers of Blacks in service or combat support units. Bryan D. Booker, *African Americans in the United States Army in World War II* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2008), 3, uses the phrase *overwhelming majority*. Jeremy P. Maxwell, *Brotherhood in Combat: How African Americans Found Equality in Korea and Vietnam* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018), states 15 percent as the number that "secured combat assignments," a figure he cites from Lanning, *The African-American Soldier*, 173.

[15] "T/O Colored Units Continental and Foreign as of 7 July 1945, STN-122," War Department General and Special Staff, G-1, RG 165, Decimal File 1942–June 1946, 291.2, Box 443, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

[16] Star, Williams, and Stouffer, "Negro Soldiers," 497.

[17] The author acknowledges that not all units are the same size. Also, the author did not attempt to inventory the exact size of every Black unit as of July 1945. Such a task would require access to countless unit records, many of which do not exist or only contain fragmentary information.

[18] Star, Williams, and Stouffer, "Negro Soldiers," 504, 508, 511.

[19] Ibid., 573–576.

[20] Ibid., 577.

[21] The following examples are illustrative and not meant to be inclusive of all White and Black relationships in World War II. The author developed this framework.

[22] Cited in Linda Hervieux, *Forgotten: The Untold Story of D-Day's Black Heroes, at Home and at War* (New York: Harper, 2015), 238.

[23] Ibid.; Elliot V. Converse et al., *The Exclusion of Black Soldiers from the Medal of Honor in World War II: The Study Commissioned by the U.S. Army to Investigate Racial Bias in the Awarding of the Nation's Highest Military Decoration* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2008), 79–80.

[24] Hervieux, *Forgotten*; Converse et al., *The Exclusion of Black Soldiers*, 80.

[25] Booker, *African Americans in the United States Army in World War II*, 113.

[26] Lee, *The Employment of Negro Troops*, 644.

[27] Charles B. MacDonald, *The Mighty Endeavor: The American War in Europe* (New York: William Morrow, 1969), 388–394, 397.

[28] Raymond E. Bell, Jr., "Black Gunners at Bastogne," *Army* 54, no. 11 (November 2004), 49–53; Denise George and Robert Child, *The Lost Eleven: The Forgotten Story of Black American Soldiers Brutally Massacred in World War II* (New York: Caliber, 2017), 272–300. The book's cover mistakenly shows Black Soldiers manning a 40mm Bofors antiaircraft gun. Besides the 320th Barrage Balloon Battalion, the only Black 40mm antiaircraft battalion in the European theater of operations was the 452nd AAA Automatic Weapons (Mobile) battalion, which was part of Patton's Third Army and protected XII Corps artillery units during this period. Although one of the most effective AAA units in Europe, it was not at Bastogne. "452nd AAA Battalion History, 1 January to 31 December 1944," CABN-452-0, 452 AAA AW Bn, NARA.

[29] Bell, "Black Gunners at Bastogne," 51.

[30] Ibid.; Converse et al., *The Exclusion of Black Soldiers*, 77–78.

[31] Bell, "Black Gunners at Bastogne," 52–53.

[32] S.L.A. Marshall, *Bastogne: The Story of the First Eight Days in Which the 101st Airborne Division Was Closed Within the Ring of German Forces* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Army History, 1988), 172.

[33] Cited in both Booker, *African Americans in the United States Army in World War II*, 120, and Bell, "Black Gunners at Bastogne," 50.

[34] Booker, *African Americans in the United States Army in World War II*, 121.

[35] Converse et al., *The Exclusion of Black Soldiers*, 75–77. The first unit was Third Platoon, Company C, 614th Tank Destroyer Battalion, for action on December 14, 1944, near Climbach, France.

[36] Booker, *African Americans in the United States Army in World War II*, 125.

[37] "The World's Most Complete Account of D-Day Fallen," National D-Day Memorial Necrology Project, https://www.dday.org/learn/necrology-project/; Gordon Harrison, *Cross-Channel Attack* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1954), 330n, estimates a total of approximately 10,000 casualties (killed, wounded, and missing) for the Allies on D-Day. For infantry casualties in the 2 months following the Normandy invasion, see Booker, *African Americans in the United States Army in World War II*, 274–275.

[38] Lanning, *The African-American Soldier*, 181–182; Lee, *The Employment of Negro Troops*, 695–705.

[39] Lanning, *The African-American Soldier*, 181–182; Lee, *The Employment of Negro Troops*, 695–705; Booker, *African Americans in the United States Army in World War II*, 277.

[40] Booker, *African Americans in the United States Army in World War II*, 279.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid., 279–280; Stouffer et al., "Negro Soldiers," 592.

[43] Star, Williams, and Stouffer, "Negro Soldiers," 589–591.

[44] For an excellent discussion of the period following World War II, see Jeremy Maxwell, *Brotherhood in Combat: How African Americans Found Equality in Korea and Vietnam* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018).

[45] Data from the Army Marketing Research Group, cited in *Inspired to Serve: The Final Report of the National Commission on Miliary, National, and Public Service*, Report to Congress (Washington, DC: National Commission on Miliary, National, and Public Service, March 2020), 32–33, https://www.volckeralliance.org/sites/default/files/attachments/Final%20Report%20-%20National%20Commission.pdf.