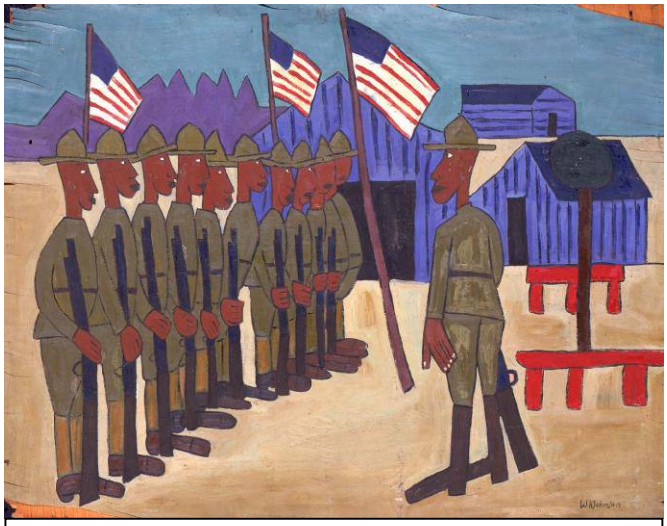
# African Americans in the Military

While the fight for African American civil rights has been traditionally linked to the 1960s, the discriminatory experiences faced by black soldiers during World War II are often viewed by historians as the civil rights precursor to the 1960s movement. During the war America's dedication to its democratic ideals was tested, specifically in its treatment of its black soldiers. The hypocrisy of waging a war on fascism abroad, yet failing to provide equal rights back home was not lost. The onset of the war brought into sharp contrast the rights of white and black American citizens. Although free, African Americans had yet to achieve full equality. The discriminatory practices in the military regarding black involvement made this distinction abundantly clear. There were only four U.S. Army units under which African Americans could serve. Prior to 1940, thirty thousand blacks had tried to enlist in the Army, but were turned away. In the U.S. Navy, blacks were restricted to roles as messmen. They were excluded entirely from the Air Corps and the Marines. This level of inequality gave rise to black organizations and leaders who challenged the status quo, demanding greater involvement in the U.S. military and an end to the military's segregated racial practices.



*Soldiers Training*, ca. 1942, William H. Johnson, oil on plywood, Smithsonian American Art Museum

**Onset of War**

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 irrevocably altered the landscape of World War II for blacks and effectively marked the entry of American involvement in the conflict. Patriotism among both whites and blacks was at an all-time high. The country emphatically banded together to topple the Axis powers. Days after the attack, African American labor organizer A. Philip Randolph argued in an article entitled "The Negro Has a Great Stake in This War," that despite the limitation of American democracy for African Americans, it was their obligation, responsibility and duty to serve because they were American citizens:

> *Japan has fired upon the United States, our country. We, all of us, black and white, Jew and Gentile, Protestant and Catholic, are at war, not only with Japan, but also with Hitler and the Axis powers. What shall the Negro do? There is only one answer. He must fight.*

> *He must give freely and fully of his blood, toil, tears and treasure to the cause of victory . . . We are citizens of the United States and we must proudly and bravely assume the obligations, responsibilities and duties of American citizens. . . . Moreover, the Negro has a great stake in this war. It is the stake of democracy – at home and abroad. Without democracy in America, limited thought it be, the Negro would not have even the right to fight for his rights.*

Yet others disagreed. At the **National Association for the Advancement of Colored People**'s (NAACP) annual conference NAACP president Arthur Spingarn professed, "Democracy will not and cannot be safe in America as long as 10 per cent of its population is deprived of the rights, privileges, and immunities plainly granted to them by the Constitution of the United States. . . . We must unceasingly continue our struggle against the attempt to weaken the military strength of our country by eliminating from the military forces a tenth of our population."

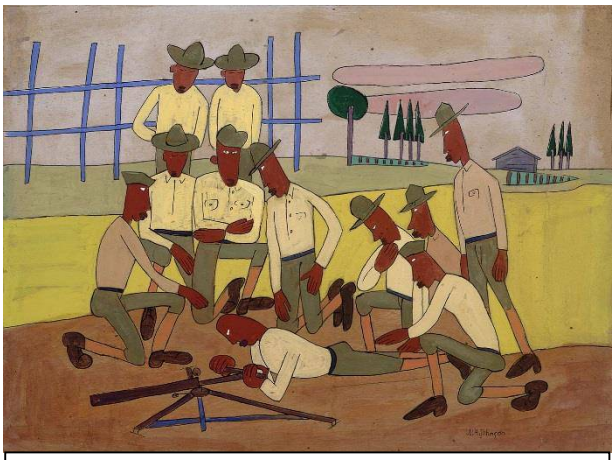
While not yet directly involved with World War II, the United States had issued the **Selective Training and Service Act**, which became law on September 16, 1940, creating the draft. It was thought prudent to start training soldiers in the event the United States joined the fray directly. The main provision of the act called for the drafting of 800,000 American men between the ages of 21 and 35. Two secondary provisions spoke to the discrimination question. Section 4 (a) stated that "In the selection and training of men under this Act, and in the interpretation and execution of the provisions of this Act, there shall be no discrimination against any person on account of race or color." Unfortunately, Section 4 (a) essentially amounted to smoke and mirrors, as the act provided the addition that the armed forces would ultimately have final say over the eligibility of any potential draftee to serve, effectively giving them control over how many African Americans were admitted. Additionally, the act failed to address the issue of segregated military units. The War Department's objections to military integration and the enlistment of African Americans were summarized by Secretary of War Harry Woodring, who stated that "The enlistment of Negroes . . . would demoralize and weaken the effectiveness of military units by mixing colored and white soldiers in closely related units, or even in the same units."

*Convalescents from Somewhere*, ca. 1942, William H. Johnson, tempera on paper, Smithsonian American Art Museum

The same month the draft was created several civil rights activists including Walter White of the NAACP, A. Philip Randolph of the **Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters** (BSCP), and T. Arnold Hill of the National Urban League, met with President Franklin D. Roosevelt to present their case for full African American integration into the American armed services. This included allowing black women to serve as nurses in the Army, Navy, and Red Cross; the appointment of black officers based on merit not race; and the opening of the Air Corps to African Americans. Roosevelt conferred with military officials and within weeks the War Department announced that blacks would be admitted to the armed services in the same proportions as white soldiers and that all branches of the military would be open to enlistment for blacks. However, black officers could only serve in black regiments and black members of the Air Corps would serve in a black-only unit; the announcement clearly stated that it was "not the policy to intermingle colored and white enlisted personnel in the same regimental organizations." It was clear that despite these small victories, segregation would continue.

A. Philip Randolph became dismayed at the slow pace of progress and so in January 1941 he began organizing a march on Washington protesting not only the discriminatory racial practices of the military but also the exclusion of blacks from employment in the defense industries. With the full support of the NAACP, Randolph promised that 50,000 to 100,000 marchers would descend upon the capital. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, a staunch supporter of integration and civil rights, met with Randolph in an attempt to have him call off the march. The march was suspended after President Roosevelt signed **Executive Order 8802**, also known as the Fair Employment Act, on June 25, 1941. The act banned discrimination in the government and defense industries stating that "it is the policy of the United States to encourage full participation in the national defense program by all citizens of the United States, regardless of race, creed, color, or national origin, in the firm belief that the democratic way of life within the Nation can be defended successfully only with the help and support of all groups within its borders."

Once the United States entered the war on December 8, 1941 following the attack on Pearl Harbor, many African Americans fervently advocated for more African American inclusion in the



*Lessons in a Soldier's Life*, ca. 1942, William H. Johnson, tempera on paper, Smithsonian American Art Museum

war, yet others could not ignore the hypocrisy of the situation with which they were faced. America had joined a war that opposed fascism and discrimination abroad, yet subjected a segment of its citizens to discriminatory practices and segregation. The irony of this was not lost, especially among young African Americans. Many wondered why they ought to serve. George Schuyler, a noted columnist for the popular black newspaper, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, argued, "Why should Negroes fight for democracy abroad when they are refused democracy in every American activity except tax paying?" African American writer C. L. R. James retorted, "Why should I shed my blood for Roosevelt's America . . . for the whole Jim Crow, Negro-hating South, for the low-paid, dirty jobs for which Negroes have to fight, for the few dollars of relief and insults, discrimination, police brutality, and perpetual poverty to which Negroes are condemned even in the more liberal North?" Others went as far as to compare the racism and discrimination faced by African Americans in the South to the racial policies and theories of Adolph Hitler.

Yet some African Americans were enthusiastic for black participation, seeing the war as a way to improve their position within American society. Army Sergeant James Tillman recalled that while he and other blacks faced many obstacles, they were fighting for something of far greater importance, the end of segregation:

> *It was rough all the way, but we were dedicated. We were fighting for a greater cause, for our people. I didn't want to see what they were doing to the Jews happen to us, and the Germans wanted to do it to everybody. We had to defeat them, and we had to prove that blacks would fight. . . . We couldn't quit. If we failed, the whole black race would fail. We were fighting for the flag and for our rights. We knew that this would be the beginning of breaking down segregation.*

**Roosevelt's Four Freedoms**

While given nearly a year before the United States entered World War II, the Four Freedoms Speech outlined four essential freedoms which everyone, everywhere should be entitled to enjoy. In the speech, part of the 1941 State of the Union Address, President Franklin D. Roosevelt imparted the four freedoms as such: freedom of speech and expression, freedom of

every person to worship God in their own way, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. Despite Roosevelt's magnanimous belief and good intentions, his words rang hollow to the ears of the millions of African Americans who knew that all of these freedoms did not, and would not, apply to them, as they faced discrimination, rejection, and abuse on a daily basis. In *The Crisis*, the official magazine of the NAACP, an African American soldier's wife wrote to the editor the following letter:

> *Why must our husbands and brothers go abroad to fight for principles they only 'hear' about at home? Does our War Department believe in the Constitution of our country? Are the 'Four Freedoms' excluding our Southern States? Does the 'Commander in Chief' realize what's going on in the hearts and minds of his colored soldiers? How long does he expect them to tolerate these deplorable conditions? Is he training them to be brave, courageous soldiers on foreign soil and mere mice here at home? Does it matter to him whether or not these men leave the shores of their homeland with the deep feeling of peace in knowing they must go to protect, and insure, Liberty and Justice to ALL here at home? Is the appeasement of the South worth the sacrifice of America's most loyal citizens? How long will this farce of Democracy continue before our President and War Department begin practicing what they preach? I wonder.*

Air Force Captain Luther H. Smith pointed out that while discriminated against, he and other black men volunteered to serve a country that discriminated against them because they believed it was their duty to protect their country: "We were black. We had lived a life of racial prejudice, discrimination, and bigotry. We were used to being considered second-class citizens, yet we have volunteered to join the military and fight in defense of the United States."

**Discrimination in the Military**

Of all of the branches of the military there were only two that would admit black soldiers during World War II; the Army and the Navy. The Marines, the Air Corps and the Coast Guard were limited to white servicemen only. However, these units kept black servicemen who were primarily appointed as laborers, cooks, or messmen. African American Marine sergeant Thomas McPhatter recalled, "The only jobs we could have here in the Marines were either taking care of the dead or ammunition, which is what I did. I joined the Marines because I thought I could avoid bigotry and racism, but I ran smack into it. No matter what skills I had, all they would let me do was take care of the ammunition

Once at camp, African American soldiers were completely segregated from their white counterparts. Barracks for blacks were usually located away from the main portion of the camp in order to avoid confrontation between the races. Essentially the housing for black soldiers

became its own segregated camp, often dubbed “the Negro Area.” At established camps, the older, more dilapidated housing was allotted to black soldiers, while whites were given preferential treatment and occupied newly constructed barracks. Sergeant Henry Jones, stationed at the Carlsbad Army Airfield in New Mexico, detailed his experiences in a Jim Crow camp in a letter to First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. His letter of March 8, 1943 described a camp in which black soldiers were abused and denied equal access to camp facilities. For example, of the 1,000 seat theater available for the soldiers’ recreation, only twenty seats in the rear were made available to blacks. Additionally, blacks were denied access to the general store on base and frequently had to walk everywhere to and from the base because the southern bus system was not available to them. Jones wrote to the First Lady, “We do not ask for special privileges. . . . All we desire is to have equality; to be free to participate in all activities, means of transportation, privileges and amusements afforded any American soldier.”

Discrimination and prejudice not only occurred with the other servicemen, but with civilians as well, especially in the South. This became a prominent issue as more than eighty percent of African Americans were sent to the South for training. Many Southern communities expressed concern at having armed African Americans stationed close to them. Officers at the training camps routinely passed blacks over for promotions and assigned them menial and humiliating jobs. In the South it was expected that the black soldiers would adhere to the **Jim Crow** laws, even if they came from the North.

By January, 1943, only 375,000 African Americans had been admitted to the armed forces, out of a total 16 million Americans that would serve over the course of the war. As the number of African Americans in the military increased, the War Department tasked General **Benjamin O. Davis Sr.**, the first African American general in the United States Army, to lead its inspector general’s office where he served on the Advisory Committee on Negro Troop Policies. Davis believed that the armed forces had the chance to set an example and improve race relations for the entire country, writing:

> *In the development of our national defense I believe the War Department has a wonderful opportunity to bring about better race relations. Policies of discrimination practiced with the current sanction of the federal government will not make the democracy we talk about in our attempt to rally the nation to our program of national defense. . . . Officers white and colored most certainly should have the same preparation. They must prepare together, live together, march together, share the hardships of the campaign. Then only will they be in a position to be mutually helpful in combat*.

**Discrimination on the Homefront**

Before U.S. entry into World War II, 8 million Americans, 7 million white and 1 million black, remained unemployed. While the New Deal provided relief to many who suffered as a result of the Great Depression, it could not stave off all unemployment. The advent of the war necessitated a greater need for factory workers to build tanks and other military equipment. Yet, white workers were given priority over black workers for defense jobs.

Prior to 1941, defense industry jobs were not open to African Americans. Thanks to labor leader A. Philip Randolph's tireless efforts in petitioning President Franklin D. Roosevelt to integrate the armed services, the president issued **Executive Order 8802** on June 25, 1941. Also known as the Fair Employment Act, it covered not only those serving in the armed forces, but also those working in defense industries on the homefront. It also established the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC), which ensured assistance to blacks and other minorities seeking jobs in the homefront industry during the war. Consequently those defense jobs which had been previously prohibited to African Americans began to open up. Also, the number of African Americans in the domestic service industry also declined and those in skilled jobs increased leading to a large occupational diversification amongst African Americans, the likes of which had never before been seen in the United States.

## Glossary

**Benjamin O. Davis Sr.**: (1877-1970) the first African-American general in the United States Army. During WWII, he lobbied for the full integration of U.S. troops.

**Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters**: founded in 1929, it was the first labor organization led by African-Americans to receive a charter in the American Federation of Labor.

**Executive Order 8802**: also known as the Fair Employment Act, signed on June 25, 1941 by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the act prohibited discrimination against blacks in the defense industry.

**Jim Crow**: state enforced segregation and disenfranchisement laws against African-Americans; enacted after the Reconstruction era.

**National Association for the Advancement of Colored People** (NAACP): African-American civil rights organization, founded in 1909 to "ensure the political, educational, social, and economic equality of rights of all persons and to eliminate racial hatred and racial discrimination."

**Selective Training and Service Act**: (1940) the first peace-time United States draft which required all males between the ages of 21 and 35 to register. When the U.S. entered WWII, the age range for conscription was changed to 18-65.