



Remembering Our Veterans

The Impact of African American Veterans on Desegregation and the Civil Rights Movement

African Americans did not hesitate when they were called for action during World War I and World War II. They were eager to join the ranks of their fellow Americans and prove their patriotism and loyalty to their country. More importantly, they saw the conflict as a chance to increase their opportunity for equality on the home front.

As veterans, they expected the same respect and appreciation white veterans received after their service. Unfortunately, they returned home to a Jim Crow segregated society where they were still treated as second class citizens. After fighting against a foreign enemy for the cause of freedom and democracy abroad, African American veterans began the same fight for equal citizenship at home. Following World War I, an African American leader wrote in *The Crisis* magazine:

“We return from fighting. We return fighting...But by the God of Heaven, we are cowards and jackasses if now that the war is over, we do not marshal every ounce of our brain and brawn to fight a sterner, longer, more unbending battle against the forces of hell in our own land.”

African American veterans were ready to lead the fight against segregation by gaining every right promised to them in the U.S. Constitution.

On occasion, their fight for racial equality became violent. When Isaac Woodard returned home from the Pacific Theater in World War II, he was stopped in Aiken, South Carolina by local law enforcement. They accused him of public drunkenness, arrested him, and then beat him. During



A World War II African American soldier receives an award at the Tuskegee Air Field in Alabama. Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.

the assault, an officer's nightstick hit Woodard's eyes and caused permanent blindness. Woodard was still in his military uniform during the incident.

African American veterans protested, asking, “Will the government that sent us thousands of miles away to death and suffering, give those who survived, the same protection all of its citizens are constitutionally entitled to?” African American servicemen began to coordinate their own veteran organizations. They formed the United Negro and Allied Veterans of America, an interracial organization that advocated the needs of all servicemen returning from war. Others staged voting rights demonstrations in the south in the 1950's, a decade before the Civil Rights Movement. The efforts of the veterans were not in vain.

In 1948 President Harry Truman issued an executive order to end segregation in the armed service. In the next American military action, the Korean Conflict, African Americans fought in integrated units with their fellow Americans. By October 1954, the Secretary of Defense announced the armed services were fully integrated.

In May 11, 1953 *Time* magazine declared, “The biggest single blow against segregation in the U.S. has been struck by the armed forces. [I]f properly led, white Americans from any part of the country will live, work, fight and die side by side with Negroes.” The military helped prove integration can work in peace and harmony. One year later, the U.S. Supreme Court announced its decision on *Brown v. Board of Education* to end segregation in public schools.

Suggested Movies

Glory (1989) Rated R

Glory is a courageous true story of the 54th Infantry of Massachusetts, a volunteer African American unit led by white officers during the Civil War. They not only fought against the Confederate army, but they also had to fight against racism placed on them by the same army for which they fought. During all their trials and tribulations, they never lost sight of their ultimate goal of ending slavery and discrimination.

The Tuskegee Airmen (1995) Rated PG-13

The Tuskegee Airmen is based on a true story of the first African American fighter pilots in the U.S. military. The film chronicles the experiences many of the pilots encountered during their training in Tuskegee, Alabama through their time in combat during World War II. The men were eager to demonstrate their abilities as pilots in order to prove their equality. The unit became highly decorated and so well respected by other white pilots that their escort was requested during bombing raids.

The Court-Martial of Jackie Robinson

(1990) Rated PG

Jackie Robinson fought segregation long before breaking the color barrier in major league baseball. Robinson was drafted into the military after graduating from UCLA as a star athlete. At first, he was denied the rank of officer despite having a college education. After becoming an officer, he refused to follow the segregation rules regarding seating on military buses and faced court-martial for doing so.

Men of Honor (2000) Rated R

Men of Honor is the story of Carl Brashear, the first African American to serve as a diver in the U.S. Navy. During his training in dive school, Brashear encountered racism from his fellow divers who refused to stay in the same barracks with an African American as well as racism in the military hierarchy. Brashear never gave up on his dream of becoming a diver and earned the respect of his comrades despite the numerous obstacles he faced.

Classroom Activity: Examining Segregation in Military Movies

The purpose of this activity is for students to critically examine a movie based on the issue of segregation in the military.

Students will watch a movie, answer discussion questions, and share their conclusions with the class.

Allow the students to choose one of the suggested movies. Parental permission may be required since two of the movies are rated R. As a homework assignment, have the students watch the movie over the weekend and answer the following questions.

- How were relationships between the different races handled in the movies?
 - Were they always positive, negative, or did they develop during the movie?
 - What did the movie demonstrate about society in its setting and during the time it was produced?
 - Compare the different movies viewed by your classmates.
- How did segregation effect the soldier(s) both in the military and in society?
 - Despite the negative effects of discrimination, what motivated the soldier(s) to continue their fight?
 - What were the different forms of discrimination presented in the movie?

During the following class period, place the students into groups of three or four. In their groups, students should discuss the movie they watched and share their conclusions on the homework questions. Bring the class together after the groups discussed their questions for a classroom discussion. Allow the students the opportunity to share their answers with the rest of the class.



Col. Benjamin O. Davis (left) and Edward C. Gleed (right) examine the sky before taking off for flight in Rametti, Italy. Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.