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Racism in the Armed Forces (USA)

By [Debra J. Sheffer](#)

Black Americans served in the First World War, fighting for democracy both abroad and at home. They sought combat and leadership positions, both of which they were generally denied. Most African American soldiers remained stateside; those sent to Europe served mainly as laborers, often under deplorable conditions. There they fought racism more than Germans, seeing little combat.

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1. American entry and democratic ideals

On 2 April 1917 President [Woodrow Wilson \(1856-1924\)](#) established spreading democracy as the centerpiece for American entry into the First World War. 10 million [black Americans](#) heard his call – and hoped. Fifty years after the Civil War had ended African Americans continued to be denied many basic rights. They saw military service, the most significant of civic obligations, as the way for them to gain entrance into the democratic society. They struggled for the opportunity to serve and achieve the rights so long denied them. The story of their service reveals that racism, not democracy, was

the centerpiece of their war.

1.1. Buffalo Soldiers' service

White America did not hold the Buffalo Soldiers in high esteem on the eve of American entry into World War I. The reputation of the 24th [Infantry](#), in particular, was tarnished as a result of violence in what came to be called the Houston mutiny or the Houston riot of August 1917. The government unwisely sent the 3rd Battalion of the 24th to guard construction workers at Camp Logan, a training camp in Houston, Texas. The 24th Infantry had a long and respectable service record. The abuse they received as a result of racism and Jim Crow laws resulted in violence with local law enforcement. Americans did not trust their black soldiers, nor did they wish black Americans to be on the battlefield in Europe. The War Department therefore sent the 10,000 Buffalo Soldiers of the 24th and 25th Infantry Regiments and 9th and 10th [Cavalry](#) Regiments to Hawaii, the Philippines, and to the Mexican border to keep them out of combat in Europe. However, [the U.S.](#) needed the manpower African American soldiers could provide. The military also wanted to appear not to be racist, while simultaneously maintaining segregation and avoiding using black soldiers in combat. The delays in conscripting black men as the War Department debated its options also drew protests from white communities that the burden of military service was not falling on both races equally. The War Department's solution was to use black troops primarily in the Service of Supply as noncombatant troops. Overall 400,000 blacks served in the war; only 10 percent served as combat troops. Of all the African Americans that served, 170,000 remained stateside to perform labor at training camps and 160,000 performed labor overseas under the Services of Supply (SOS). The ranks included 370,000 draftees. Of the volunteers, 5,000 were in eight National Guard units.^[1]

1.2. Camp Des Moines

Civil rights organizations lobbied vocally for equal treatment in the wartime military and pressed especially hard for the creation of a camp to train black officers. On 19 May 1917 the War Department designated Fort Des Moines, Iowa as the only site where they would train black officers, beginning on 18 June. 250 soldiers from the Regular Army were sent to Camp Des Moines.

Lieutenant colonel [Charles Young \(1864-1922\)](#), who had served with the 10th Cavalry on the 1916 Punitive Expedition, was the obvious choice to train the candidates and lead them in battle in [France](#). However, a combination of racism and high blood pressure led to his forced early retirement on 30 July 1917, at the age of forty-three. The news devastated both the men at Des Moines and the entire black community, which felt betrayed. On 6 November 1918, five days before the armistice on 11 November, the Army reinstated Young for service in Liberia, where he contracted a fever and died.^[2]

[Charles Ballou \(1862-1928\)](#), a racist and former commander of the 24th Infantry Regiment, made sure the training at Des Moines included only infantry. As the ninety-day training ended, with no plans of where to use the officers, the War Department simply extended the training another four weeks to

keep them out of the way. Some soldiers gave up and went home. When the camp closed on 14 October 1917, 639 candidates had earned commissions as first and second lieutenant and a few as captain. They received a furlough to visit families and prepare to report to their next assignment on 1 November. Those who received assignments were assigned to the 92nd Division, with Ballou in command.^[3]

2. The 92nd Division

To provide additional opportunities to serve while maintaining segregation, the War Department created two all-black combat divisions, the 92nd Division, established on 29 November 1917, and the 93rd Division (Provisional), established in early December 1917. These units included the 365th Infantry Regiment from Texas and Oklahoma, the 366th from Alabama, the 367th from New York, and the 368th from Tennessee, Pennsylvania, and Maryland. Black officers from the first segregated officer training course at Camp Des Moines and ineffective white senior officers, such as Charles Ballou, led the division. The 92nd arrived in France in June 1918 poorly trained, a result of the War Department scattering its component units to different training camps throughout the United States. The Division lacked unit cohesion, lived in poor housing, and suffered in high numbers from [influenza](#); furthermore, the soldiers were targets of violence – including murder – by white soldiers stationed nearby.^[4]

Unexpected opportunity came when the 92nd was rushed to take part in General [John J. Pershing's \(1860-1948\)](#) Argonne Offensive in September 1918. The division's 368th Regiment was selected to fill a critical gap in the attack. However, the soldiers were not provided the tools and weapons they needed to accomplish the task. White officers, such as Ballou, claimed they failed because of cowardice and saw this as confirmation of their low expectations of black soldiers. This unfair evaluation haunted the entire division for years after the war. The experience of this division contrasted sharply with the experiences of the 93rd Division, which served under French, rather than American, command.

3. Serving with the French

The 93rd Division was a provisional division that consisted of only four infantry regiments, unlike the 92nd, which had all the requisite units of a combatant division. The 369th Infantry Regiment, formerly the 15th New York National Guard, also known as the Rattler and the Harlem Hellfighters, and the 370th Infantry Regiment, formerly the Eighth Illinois National Guard, also known as the Torchbearers, were two of four regiments of the all-black 93rd Division.^[5] The 369th arrived at St. Nazaire on 8 March, the 370th on 12 May. They initially built roads and a dam but did not remain a labor unit for

long. The four infantry regiments of the 93rd were fully incorporated into the French army for the duration of the war and saw extensive action on the [Western Front](#). The 369th fought a long and noble war. In combat for 191 straight days, longer than any other American regiment, of the original 2,000 soldiers, more than 1,300 were killed or wounded. Despite the high level of casualties, the soldiers of the 369th fought on and were the first American combat troops to reach the Rhine. The French awarded members of the 369th 170 individual Croix de Guerre as well as a unit citation.^[6] Civil rights activists repeatedly cited the heroism of the unit in their campaigns against racial discrimination and segregation.

4. After the war

As in every past war in which they had fought, black Americans hoped to gain equality through their service. They served well in Europe and believed that white America would recognize that service. They were, however, mistaken, instead returning home to increased racism and violence. The summer of 1919 was called the “Red Summer” because of the increased violence against black Americans, including murder. Some black soldiers were even lynched while wearing their uniform. The returning soldiers fought back, however. They joined fledgling civil rights groups in large numbers, participating in a pivotal transition within the civil rights movement that rejected gradualism and demanded an immediate end to discrimination and segregation.^[7]

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Notes

1. ↑ Barbeau, Arthur E. / Henri, Florette: *The Unknown Soldiers. African-American Troops in World War I*, Philadelphia 1996, pp. 70-72.
2. ↑ Sammons, Jeffrey T. / Morrow, Jr., John H.: *Harlem’s Rattlers and the Great War. The Undaunted 369th Regiment and the African American Quest for Equality*, Lawrence 2014, p. 113.
3. ↑ Williams, Chad L.: *Torchbearers of Democracy. African American Soldiers in the World War I Era*, Chapel Hill 2010, p. 67.
4. ↑ *Ibid*, pp. 81, 128.
5. ↑ Sammons / Morrow, *Harlem’s Rattlers* 2014, p. 3; Williams, *Torchbearers of Democracy* 2010, p. 8.
6. ↑ Nelson, Peter N.: *A More Unbending Battle. The Harlem Hellfighters’ Struggle for Freedom in WWI and Equality at Home*, New York 2009, p. 205.
7. ↑ Sammons / Morrow, *Harlem’s Rattlers* 2014, p. 3.

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