

AFRICAN AMERICANS IN WORLD WAR II: FIGHTING FOR A DOUBLE VICTORY



Tuskegee Airmen and P-47 (San Diego Air & Space Museum Archives)

At the same time that African Americans were serving bravely in World War II, they were also struggling for their own civil rights at home. The United States military was segregated until 1948, 3 years after the end of World War II. In 1941, before Pearl Harbor and the United States' entrance into the war, less than 4000 African Americans served in the military. Only 12 had the opportunity to rise through the ranks to become officers. By the end of the war, in 1945, more than 1.2 million African Americans were in the military, working on the Homefront, in Europe or the Pacific.

African Americans experienced segregation at home and in the military. Sometimes they were passed over by all white draft boards. Civil rights organizations worked to get President Roosevelt to pledge that African Americans would be represented in the military according to their percentage of the population, 10.6% at that time. Although numbers never reached that high, more and more African Americans became members of the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines and Coast Guard.

At the beginning of the war, African Americans were usually assigned to non-combat units, bringing in supplies and providing maintenance and transportation. As the war progressed and American troops were injured or killed, the military began placing African American troops into combat roles. And yet, in some locations during their training in the United States, African American soldiers could not eat in the same restaurants, wait in the same bus stations or use the same water fountains as their white counterparts.

On June 6, 1944, during the D-Day invasion on Omaha and Utah beaches, 1700 African American soldiers participated. Soon the African American 761st Tank Battalion was fighting in France with General Patton's Third Army. Over 183 days in combat, they captured 30 towns in France, Belgium and Germany.

The Air Force set up African American fighter and bomber groups. The famous Tuskegee Airmen flew support and escort missions over Italy. They flew more than 15,000 sorties between May 1943 and June 1945. White bomber crews often asked to be escorted by the Tuskegee Airmen. Sixty six Tuskegee Airmen died in combat in World War II.



The 761st Tank Battalion, known as the Black Panthers, was the first all-Black tank unit in World War II. Photo courtesy of the Patton Museum.



During World War II African American leaders and organizations developed the "Double V" campaign. They appealed for victory against the enemy in war and victory against racism at home. In 1948, President Truman ended segregation in the American military. African Americans were ready to work to achieve equal rights at home.

Photo courtesy of the Pittsburgh Courier

Text adapted from The National World War II Museum www.nationalww2museum.org