

## African Americans in the armed forces

Written by Doris I. Mangrum  
Wednesday, 19 February 2014 15:31

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When you read, hear or think of the Armed Forces of the United States of America, some of the words that may come readily to mind are strength, power, dominance and superiority.

There is another word that should also be added to that list ... African-Americans. The road to recognition for these soldiers has not always been easy, but that didn't deter the grit, guts and determination displayed by these great warriors.

From the Revolutionary War to the War of 1812, from the Mexican-American War as well as the Civil War, Spanish-American War, the World Wars, Vietnam War, Gulf War, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and the minor conflicts too; in every war fought by or within the United States African-Americans have contributed.

There is a virtual who's who among African-Americans within the annals of the Armed Forces. The Civil War recorded a total of 186,097 African-American soldiers serving in artillery, infantry, carpenters and chaplains, as scouts, spies, steamboat pilots, nurses and surgeons all contributing to the war cause.

In the Indian Wars, African-Americans were used to fight against Native-Americans. The most well known were the Buffalo Soldiers of the 9th and 10th Cavalry as well as the 24th and 25th Infantry Regiment.

During World War I, one of the most distinguished units was the 369th Infantry Regiment. They were known as the Harlem Hellfighters and were on the front lines for six months – longer than any other American unit in the war. 171 members of the 369th were awarded the Legion of Merit.

A name to remember from the Spanish Civil War is Salaria Kee, an African-American nurse from Harlem Hospital who served in that capacity with the American Medical Bureau. She was one of the only two African-American female volunteers in the midst of the war-torn Spanish Republican areas.

Stories of African-American heroism are woven throughout the historical quilt of World War II. Commander Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. served as the commander of the famed Tuskegee Army Airfield. He later went on to become the first African-American general in the United States Air Force. His father, Benjamin O. Davis, Sr. was the first African-American Brigadier General in the Army. And who can forget Doris Miller of Pearl Harbor fame?

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In December 1944, in the midst of the Battle of the Bulge, Gen. Dwight Eisenhower was severely short of replacement troops for existing military units. Because of this, he made the decision to allow African-American soldiers to pick up a weapon and join the white military units to fight in combat for the first time. More than 2,000 valiant Black soldiers volunteered to go to the front. This was an important step toward desegregating the United States military.

President Harry Truman signed Executive Order 9981 on July 26, 1948, integrating the military and mandating equality of treatment and opportunity. Desegregation of the military was not complete for several years. The last all-Black unit wasn't disbanded until 1954.

Jesse Brown became the Navy's first Black aviator in 1948. An escort ship was named after him. During the Vietnam War, 20 African-Americans received the Medal of Honor. Other names for the honor roll include Army Gen. Colin Powell, who became the first – and to date only – African-American to serve as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1989. Gen. William E. "Kip" Ward was officially nominated as the first commander of the new United States Africa Command on July 10, 2007 and assumed command on Oct. 1, 2007.

The sergeant major of the Marine Corps is selected by the commandant of the Marine Corps to serve as his advisor and as the preeminent and highest ranking enlisted Marine with a protocol equivalency of a lieutenant general. Alford McMichael, John Estrada, and Carlton Kent served back to back to back tours in this highly regarded position.

There are far too many acts of valor of brave African-American men and women who sacrificed to protect and defend this great nation to list individually. Named or unnamed, the essence of these great soldiers rings loud and proud. The Saidiana Veterans Memorial Choir and Honor and Color Guard are honored to salute and celebrate the accomplishments of these mighty warriors.



*Doris I. Mangrum is a long time advocate for families and children with the last 25 years in the services of families in transition because of deployment, incarceration, study abroad or any other reason for separation. She is an author, speaker, filmmaker, radio/ TV host and producer.*