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Leaders & Success

Benjamin O. Davis Was A Star

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INVESTOR'S BUSINESS DAILY

Posted 5/16/2007

As U.S. forces flooded into Europe after the invasion of 1944, the brutal necessities of war shone an unflattering light on one aspect of American culture: racial segregation.

Black citizens had joined the Allied cause along with the rest of Americans only to find that "separate but equal" laws applied even to foreign battlefields.

The ranks stayed segregated, with black soldiers initially kept away from battle. Promotions for blacks were rare. Even blood plasma was kept segregated.

It was an absurd situation that harmed military effectiveness, undermined morale and created innumerable bureaucratic headaches.

No one did more to highlight this, and ultimately undermine the segregation policy, than Brig. Gen. Benjamin Oliver Davis Sr. (1880-1970), the Army's first black general.

Davis served 50 years in uniform, beginning as a cavalry man in the fading days of the Wild West and rising to one-star status in World War II. He remains among the few of any race to reach that high after starting as an enlisted man.

Davis was a star in more than the general sense. He won the Bronze Star, the Distinguished Service Medal and the French Croix de Guerre, among other honors.

"I have been a soldier all my life, and the Army is my life. I take pride in it and I like to see others filled with that same sense of pride," he told a high school in January 1944, according to Marvin Fletcher's "America's First Black General."

General Questions

Pride in the institution did not preclude him from questioning its policies. Once he attained the rank of general, Davis became the most persistent internal critic of the Army's racial policies.

He knew that the need to win on the battlefield would always be the Army's overriding goal. By repeatedly pointing out that segregationist policies interfered with that, he set the stage for their ultimate abolition. His efforts helped make the Army the first major U.S. institution to desegregate.

Davis was born in Washington, D.C., on May 28, 1880. He was the grandchild of slaves on his mother's side. His father's family was freed before the Civil War.

A black cavalry unit, part of the famed Buffalo Soldiers who fought out West and in the Spanish-American War, was stationed near his home. Young Davis idolized them and resolved to join their ranks.

"As far back as I can remember, I wanted to be a soldier," he recalled.

He became a cadet in high school, then lied about his birthday to enlist in the National Guard on April 25, 1898, at age 17. Later that year he enlisted in the regular Army.

Davis' energy and enthusiasm got him noticed fast. After helping recruit additional troops for the Spanish-American War, he was promoted to lieutenant just three months after enlisting. He was barely 18.

His unit never went to Cuba. He was shipped instead to the Philippines, but his duties there were mainly administrative. He later served in cavalry units in Wyoming, Utah and Arizona.

Aside from a few times when his cavalry patrols came under fire from banditos and renegade Indians, Davis would never know battle firsthand. He never shirked from combat duty, but the Army's policy, he soon discovered, bizarrely prevented him from fighting.

"There were a number of reasons for this, but it generally came down to the Army's unwillingness to place a black officer in a situation where he could command a white officer," Fletcher told IBD.

It wasn't the only hardship he faced. Some superior officers were hostile to him. His status as a black officer often kept him isolated and lonely. He had to be distant from the enlisted men and had few other officers he could socialize with.

Yet he never lost faith in the institution, which he saw as far more open and accommodating to blacks than any other place in America. "The colored people are fighting segregation. The Army is the best agency to solve this problem," he said.

Davis served faithfully, teaching cadets at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama and other schools, becoming military attache to Liberia in Africa and leading National Guard units in Illinois, Ohio and New York. He even escorted war widows to Europe after World War I.

He showed a particular skill with foreign languages, teaching himself French, Spanish and even Visayan, a Filipino language.

Davis showed a diplomat's talent in resolving situations amicably and fairly. He always reminded the Army of its duty to all its troops, and the black soldiers of their responsibilities as part of the Army. "The Army is allowed to work out the situation in its own way," he said.

His son, Benjamin Davis Jr., said in Fletcher's book: "He attempted to educate whites in their dealings with blacks, and blacks in their dealings with whites. He tactfully informed (both) when he thought their actions were unmilitary."

By the mid-1930s, Davis had risen to the rank of colonel. He was approaching retirement when America entered World War II in 1941.

The mobilization included black soldiers, and the War Department soon realized it needed help to deal with this. It turned to Davis.

Soon he was promoted to one-star general and assigned to the Army's inspector general to handle problems relating to black troops. It was a grueling job. "As the number of drafted black troops grew, all of the problems that existed (prior to Pearl Harbor) got larger and more menacing," Fletcher wrote.

To handle that trouble, Davis met with troops stateside and on overseas battlefields.

"No complaint has been too small to receive attention, and I have listened to them all," Davis said.

From them, he produced a steady stream of reports to the Pentagon outlining the injustices segregation put upon black soldiers and the harm this did to the Allied cause by undermining morale, starving the Army of manpower and reducing combat effectiveness.

"Segregation fosters intolerance, suspicion and friction," Davis said.

Closer contact between troops would eliminate these problems, he argued. Attitudes changed for the better once black and white soldiers began to fight side by side.

More to the point, he noted that segregation was alienating blacks from the Army itself.

Seeing Results

Davis lost more battles than he won with the military, but his persistence began to pay off as the Pentagon and its civilian leadership came to realize the damage segregation did. That, combined with the gallantry of many blacks in World War II — including Davis' son, a leader of the Tuskegee Airmen — caused a major shift in attitudes.

After 50 years of service, Davis retired on July 20, 1948. President Truman was on hand for the ceremony. Six days later the president signed Executive Order 9981, which called for the military's integration.

The old soldier hung on until age 90, dying at Great Lakes Naval Hospital in Illinois in 1970. He lived long enough to see his son become the first black general in the Air Force.