

African-Americans Have Legacy of Military Service, Sacrifice

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(PressMediaWire) WASHINGTON, Feb. 12, 2008 - Since the birth of America, African-Americans have been fighting and dying alongside their countrymen as the United States has struggled for freedom and peace at home and abroad. African-American soldiers have fought in every war the United States has participated in, including the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, the Civil War, the Spanish American War, World Wars I and II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, and the current war on terror.

African-Americans, both free and slaves, participated in all the conflicts in the early days of America. About 5,000 African-American soldiers fought for the U.S. in the American Revolutionary War. African-Americans distinguished themselves in the Boston Massacre in 1770, the Battle of Lexington and Concord in 1775, the Battle of Bunker Hill in 1775, and throughout the Revolution.

In the Civil War, 180,000 African-Americans made up 163 units of the Union Army, and many more served in the Union Navy. African-Americans were used mostly for labor by the Confederate forces, although in 1865, Confederate President Jefferson Davis signed a bill authorizing the enlistment of slaves.

African-American soldiers proved themselves early in the war, such as in 1863, when the 1st Kansas Colored Volunteers, commanded by Gen. James G. Blunt, ran into a strong Confederate force in what is now Oklahoma. After a two-hour bloody engagement, the Confederate soldiers retreated. The 1st Kansas, which had held the center of the Union line, advanced to within fifty paces of the Confederate line and exchanged fire for some 20 minutes until the Confederates broke and ran.

After the battle, Blunt wrote, "I never saw such fighting as was done by the negro regiment. ... The question that negroes will fight is settled; besides they make better soldiers in every respect than any troops I have ever had under my command."

Fifteen African-American soldiers were awarded the Medal of Honor for their actions in the Civil War, and another seven African-American sailors were honored for their heroism.

In 1866, federal legislation was passed that allowed African-Americans to enlist in the regular Army, and by 1869, the Army had four all-African-American units: the 9th and 10th Cavalry and 24th and 25th Infantry regiments. The two infantry regiments were established by consolidating four infantry regiments that had been formed earlier.

It was these African-American units that fought in the Indian Wars of 1867-1891, the Spanish-American War in 1898, the Philippines Insurrection from 1899 to 1901, and Gen. John Pershing's punitive expedition into Mexico in 1916. These units were dubbed "Buffalo Soldiers" by the Indians they fought against. It is thought that this nickname was given out of respect for the African-Americans' fierce fighting ability and naturally curly hair. The term "Buffalo Soldiers" became a generic term for all African-American soldiers for many years.

The first African-American general officer in the U.S. Army was Benjamin O. Davis, of Washington, D.C. Davis entered the military on July 13, 1898, during the Spanish-American War, as a temporary first lieutenant of the 8th United States Volunteer Infantry. He was mustered out on March 6, 1899, and on June 18, 1899, he enlisted as a private in Troop 1, 9th Cavalry, of the regular Army. He then served as corporal and squadron sergeant major, and on Feb. 2, 1901, he was commissioned a second lieutenant of cavalry in the regular Army.

Davis reached the rank of brigadier general on Oct. 25, 1940. He retired on July 31, 1941, and was recalled to active duty with the rank of brigadier general the following day. During his career, Davis served with the 9th and 10th Cavalry; was a professor of military science and tactics at Wilberforce University, Ohio, and Tuskegee, Ala.; served as a brigade commander in 2nd Cavalry Division; and served as an assistant to the inspector general in Washington, D.C.

Davis' son, retired Air Force Lt. Gen. Benjamin O. Davis Jr., was the fourth African-American graduate of the U.S. Military Academy and the nation's second African-American general officer.

Although the U.S. armed forces remained segregated throughout World War I, many African-Americans volunteered and fought with U.S. forces. By the end of the war, more than 350,000 African-Americans had served in the conflict, 1,400 of whom were commissioned officers.

Many African-American units were relegated to support roles during World War I, but several units did distinguish themselves in combat. One of the most famous units was the 369th Infantry Regiment, known as the "Harlem Hellfighters," which was on the front lines for six months. One hundred seventy-one members of the 369th were awarded the Legion of Merit medal. Cpl. Freddie Stowers, of 371st Infantry Regiment, was posthumously awarded a Medal of Honor in 1991, making him the only African-American to be so honored for actions in World War I. Stowers led an assault on German trenches in France and continued to lead his men even after being wounded twice.

In World War II, more than 2.5 million African-Americans registered for service, but only 1 million actually served. African-American servicemembers served in Casablanca, Italy, the Aleutians, Northern Ireland, Liberia, New Guinea, the China-Burma-India theater, Guam, Iwo Jima, Guadalcanal, Bougainville, Saipan, Okinawa, Peleliu, Australia, France, and England.

It was during World War II that the famed Tuskegee Airmen served. Actually the 332nd Fighter Group of the U.S. Army Air Corps, the Tuskegee Airmen were the first African-American military pilots. The 332nd's most notable mission was escorting bombing raids into Austria, Hungary, Poland and Germany. The pilots flew more than 15,000 sorties and were awarded several Silver Stars, 150 Distinguished Flying Crosses, eight Purple Hearts, 14 Bronze Stars, and 744 Air Medals.

In 1948, President Harry S. Truman signed Executive Order 9981, integrating the armed forces and eliminating racial discrimination in federal employment. Segregation in the military officially ended in 1954, when the last all-African-American unit was abolished.

The Korean War and Vietnam War both saw many great accomplishments by African-American servicemembers. In the Korean War, Jesse L. Brown, the first African-American U.S. Navy aviator, was killed when his plane was shot down during the Battle of Chosin Reservoir. The Navy honored Brown by naming an escort ship after him -- the USS Jesse L. Brown.

During the Vietnam War, African-Americans continued to join the military in large numbers. Overall, 20 African-Americans were awarded the Medal of Honor for their actions in that conflict, including the first living African-American to receive the Medal of Honor since the Mexican-American War, the first African-American Marine to receive the medal, and the first African-American commissioned officer to receive the medal.

African-American enlistment into the U.S. military jumped with the advent of the all-volunteer force in 1973. African-Americans made up about 17 percent of the military's enlisted force when the draft ended in 1973. By the early 1980s, African-Americans made up nearly 24 percent of the enlisted force. When the United States and its allies pushed Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's forces out of Kuwait in 1991, the most senior officer in the U.S. military was an African-American, Army Gen. Colin L. Powell, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Powell later served as secretary of state in President George W. Bush's administration.

Today, African-Americans continue to serve the nation as members of the military during the war on terror. February is African-American History Month, which celebrates the contributions African-Americans have made in the U.S. over the years.

(Information for this article was taken from several military, government and civilian sources.)