



African Americans were by far the largest minority group in the US military during World War II. By the end of 1942, over half a million of these citizens were in uniform, but they had to fight for the right to serve. The Roosevelt administration's original **mobilization** plan had called for only half as many African Americans as eventually served, and blacks were to be placed predominantly in support units rather than combat outfits. Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, US Army Air Force chief Henry "Hap" Arnold, and a number of other top military leaders believed that African Americans were less intelligent than whites and had inferior leadership capabilities. "Leadership is not embedded in the Negro race," Stimson wrote in his diary. "Every time we try to lift them a little beyond where they can go, disaster and confusion follows." But manpower shortages and mounting political pressure from First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People led President Franklin Delano Roosevelt to pledge that African Americans would be enlisted according to their percentage of the population. Although this percentage, 10.6 percent, was never attained, by 1945 more than 1.2 million African Americans would be serving in uniform on the Home Front, in Europe, and in the Pacific, including thousands of African American women in the women's auxiliaries.

The treatment of African American soldiers in the military mirrored the segregation and discrimination they experienced at home. Most units and training camps were segregated.

Even when blacks and whites served in the same units, black soldiers could not hold a rank higher than the lowest-rated white soldier. This meant fewer promotions for African American soldiers. Most segregated black units had white commanders, a practice justified by the official but erroneous belief that black soldiers preferred to serve under white officers. Historian Stephen Ambrose identified the lamentable American irony of World War II, writing, "The world's greatest democracy fought the world's greatest racist with a segregated army."

African American soldiers performed honorably in Europe. The Red Ball Express, a truck-transport system for moving supplies across France to armies near the German border, was manned predominately by African Americans. The Tuskegee Airmen, stationed in southern Italy, escorted American bombers on perilous missions over the Alps and to the heavily defended Romanian oil fields, earning the respect of the all-white bomber crews.

ONLINE RESOURCES

ww2classroom.org

- ▶ Roscoe Brown Oral History
- ▶ Daniel Inouye Oral History
- ▶ Liberation of Paris Video
- ▶ Italian Campaign Video
- ▶ What Would You Do? Scenario: Segregation

Only one fully African American division, the 92nd, was permitted to serve in combat. It fought mainly in northern Italy, the men facing heavy opposition from the enemy as they dealt with the undisguised prejudice of their white, largely Southern-born officers. Many of the officers and enlisted men believed they were being used as “cannon fodder” by their commanding officer, General Edward M. Almond, who believed that leadership and discipline were “characteristics that are abnormal to the [Negro] race.”

“There was not a lot of camaraderie, but there was some respect.”

Roscoe Brown Jr., Tuskegee Airman

Despite this, units of the 92nd performed with distinction. Two members of the outfit, Vernon J. Baker, a platoon leader from Cheyenne, Wyoming, and Lieutenant John Fox were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor retroactively long after the war. No African Americans were awarded the honor during the war. Caught in the middle of a vicious firefight in the mountains of northern Italy, Fox called in an artillery barrage dangerously close to himself. When his commander protested, claiming it was too risky, Fox shouted, “Fire it! There’s more of them than there are of us! Give them hell!” Fox was killed hours later, but his selfless action helped his unit recapture an enemy-held town.

Japanese American soldiers also struggled with discrimination at home and in the military. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, government officials feared Japanese American civilians would conduct sabotage and spying operations on American soil. On the West Coast, over 110,000 Japanese Americans, most of them American citizens, were pulled from their homes and placed in 10 incarceration camps on barren land in the interior of the country. None of these people were convicted or even accused of a crime before being taken into custody. Draft-board administrators classified second-generation Japanese American citizens (or Nisei) as “4-C,” or “enemy **alien**,” making them ineligible to serve in the military.



Tuskegee Airmen of the 332nd Fighter Group discuss plans for an upcoming mission at Ramitelli, Italy, in March 1945.

(Image: Library of Congress, LC-F9-02-4503-319-04.)

Future US Senator Daniel Inouye of Hawaii was among the thousands of Nisei who fought for the right to defend their country. “Here I was, 17 years old, who considered himself a lover of this country and patriot, called an **alien** enemy,” Inouye said. Inouye and other Nisei petitioned President Roosevelt to be permitted to join the military, and eventually their request was granted. Over 33,000 Nisei served in the US Army, most notably in the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, whose motto was “Go for broke!” The 442nd sustained 9,486 casualties during the war and was the most decorated unit in the entire Army. Yet only one Japanese American was awarded the Medal of Honor.

In the 1990s, President Bill Clinton righted a wrong, honoring a number of African American and Japanese American servicemen who served valorously in World War II. Seven African Americans, including John Fox and Vernon Baker, were awarded the Medal of Honor in 1997, all except Baker posthumously. Three years later, 22 Asian Americans, including Inouye, became Medal of Honor recipients, 11 of them posthumously.