Continuity or Change: African Americans in World War II

Overview:

Many historians have posed the question: Was World War II a watershed event in the African-American Civil Rights Movement? During the war, the “Double V” campaign of the black press called for victory over fascism abroad and racism at home. In this lesson, students will investigate primary-source materials to develop an understanding of the experience of African Americans in the war overseas and on the home front. In doing so, they will consider whether the contradictory gains made in the areas of civil rights, housing, work and military service represented a break with the past or a continuation of the status quo.

History Standards: African American Studies Sol- 9-10
Content Standard: Guided reading From Slavery to Freedom Chapter 17-18
Guided reading Primary and secondary sources
Chapter 17-18: The Great Depression and World War II (1929-1945)
Standard 9-10: The causes and course of World War II, the character of the war, at home and abroad, and its reshaping of the U.S. role in world affairs. The social, political and economic effects on African Americans

Historical Thinking Standards:
- Historical Analysis and Interpretation:
  A. Identify cause and effects of the great depression and WW2 as it relates to African Americans.

- Historical Research Capabilities:
  B. Analyze historical reading and data
  C. Interpret historical data.
  D. Construct an historical interpretation

Lesson Objectives:
- Students will examine the experience of African Americans during World War II by analyzing primary sources and formulating historical questions.
- Students will evaluate and interpret the African American experience during World War II.

Topic Background:

Historians studying the experience of African Americans in World War II consistently ask one central question: “Was World War II a watershed event for African
Americans?" In other words, does World War II represent a continuation of policies of segregation and discrimination both on the home front and in the military, or does it represent the beginning of a break with the past that informed the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s? Historians of the 1960s focused on the war experience as a "watershed" leading to the civil rights upheavals of the 1960s. Although African Americans had lost much of the wartime years' social and economic progress by the early 1950s, the gains in the military, job training and political organization served as a catalyst for the protests of the 1950s that in turn helped fuel later civil rights actions. The fact that outstanding contributions to the war effort did not result in tangible long-term gains inflamed African Americans and encouraged activism. More recently, historians have tempered the notion of the 1940s as "watershed" or "revolution" in the Black experience, but still emphasize its significance in presaging the modern Civil Rights Movement. ¹

African Americans had suffered profoundly in the Great Depression. Already at the bottom of the economic ladder when it began, the Depression reinforced the poverty of Black America. Black unemployment was two times greater than white unemployment. Black families earned 1/3 the income of white families and 2/3 of Blacks held unskilled jobs in comparison with 1/5 of whites. Most African Americans lived in the segregated South and 1/10 had little formal education. ² The collapse of the agricultural economy coupled with subsidies for landowners that encouraged them to displace sharecropping families left many African Americans without a means of support or a place to live. Competition over the few jobs that remained in the midst of the economic depression increased racially motivated violence during the 1930s. The New Deal offered some help, but overall did too little to ameliorate the special circumstances faced by African Americans and, in addition, perpetuated inequalities based on race. ³

World War II presented some new opportunities for African Americans to participate in the war effort and thereby earn an equal place in American society and politics. From the outset the African American press urged fighting a campaign for a "Double V": victory against fascism abroad and victory over racism at home. Emphatically they declared, unlike World War I, that there would be no "closed ranks," or lessening of racial activism, in order to present a united front to America’s enemies.


Many African Americans felt that the earlier implementation of this conciliatory policy had resulted in no real progress for Blacks in the 1920s. Despite the literary and artistic achievements of the Harlem Renaissance, no economic or political gains resulted from the distinguished service of African Americans at home and abroad during the First World War. During World War II, then, most African Americans participated willingly, but reserved their right to protest against treatment stateside that they found intolerable. 4

On the home front A. Philip Randolph’s 1941 threat to force a March on Washington to advocate for civil rights in wartime employment represented this new attitude. When government defense contracting first began in 1940 and 1941, the federal government acceded to the demands of many businesses that stipulated whites only hiring. For example, of 100,000 aircraft workers in 1940, only 240 of them were African American and most of those served in unskilled positions as janitors. 5 In order to protest this discrimination, Randolph, head of the powerful Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, threatened a march on the nation’s capital of 100,000 African Americans. Attempting to avert this embarrassingly large protest, Roosevelt sent his wife and the Mayor of New York to negotiate with Randolph and offered to call business leaders to request they hire Blacks. This gesture, however, did not fulfill Randolph’s demands and he refused to back down. Three days before the averted march was to take place, Roosevelt signed Executive Order 8802 that banned discrimination in government hiring exactly as Randolph had requested. In addition, 8802 established the Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPC) to address reports of non-compliance. 6 The under-funded and under-staffed FEPC had no enforcement power, its public hearings and ability to cancel government contracts applied pressure to businesses and unions to create a climate of equity. 5 Overall, the African American press viewed the pressure applied by Randolph and the FEPC as a “guarded victory.” 6

Although EO 8802 resulted in more jobs being opened to African Americans and established federal support for integration and equity, discrimination continued to exist. For example, the Marentmont Automobile Company in Chicago refused to hire fifteen African American women because, according to the manager of the plant, white women refused to share toilet facilities with them. 7 In addition, the resistance of whites to work with Blacks motivated some companies to defy 8802 because they feared losing their white employees. Lester Detterbeck, VP of the George A. Detterbeck Company, violated the executive order because of his certainty that at least fifteen

5 Takaki, *Double V*, 47.
employees would leave if he employed African Americans. In 1943, 20,000 white employees of the Alabama Dry Dock and Shipbuilders Company protested the promotion of African American welders so vehemently federal troops had to be called in to settle the disturbance and the FEPC had to drop its claim of discrimination. By 1943 African American employment in defense industries had improved somewhat, reaching almost 8% of total defense jobs by 1945. This can more accurately be credited to the increased demand for labor as the war advanced than to any change of policy by business or the administration. Other improvements included more African Americans working at positions of higher skill and earning a higher pay rate. The gap between white and Black workers had narrowed slightly by the end of the war. Thus, despite the lack of social and political opportunities that resulted from WWII, there were some true economic gains that African Americans realized, even if they were disproportionately smaller than their white counterparts.

As the war progressed 700,000 African American families migrated North and West to take advantage of defense jobs, increasing racial tensions in key cities. By the middle of the war continued discrimination combined with frustration about overcrowded and unsanitary living conditions and exploded into a series of race riots. In 1943, according to the Social Science Institute at Fisk University, these tensions resulted in 242 conflicts in 47 cities throughout the country. A riot in Detroit resulted in $2 million in lost property, hundreds of injuries and thirty-four deaths, mostly Blacks. Five weeks later the Harlem riot resulted in $5 million in damage, 550 arrested, 500 injured and six people killed. In each of the riots the police, trying to maintain control, reportedly arrested and injured African Americans at a much higher rate than white rioters. The potential of these inflammatory riots spreading caused many of the Black newspapers to refuse to publish photographs so as not to incite further violence. Though warned about the threat to key cities, Roosevelt did nothing to ameliorate the conditions that helped spark the riots. Contrary to the fears of many leaders in the Black community who worried that a frightened public would resist increased equality, the riots served as evidence of Black frustration and willingness to act, slightly increasing support for a more comprehensive civil rights movement, especially among Northern whites. Following the riots, several cities established interracial commissions

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8 Ibid., 425.
10 Ibid., 114.
11 Takaki, *Double V*, 50.
12 Ibid., 53
13 Ibid., 54
15 Takaki, *Double V*, 53.
African Americans in World War II

African Americans made an auspicious entry into World War II when messman Doris (Dorie) Miller’s acts of valor at Pearl Harbor went well beyond the call of duty. Messman Miller, an African American from Waco, Texas, braved strafing enemy planes to help remove his mortally wounded captain to a place of greater safety. Before the day was through, Miller downed Japanese planes while manning a machine gun on the water-covered deck of the battleship West Virginia. For his heroism, Miller received the Navy Cross which was personally presented by Adm. Chester W. Nimitz. On June 30, 1973, in recognition of Miller’s valor during WWII, the escort ship USS Miller (DE 1091) was commissioned.

In spite of other acts of bravery and a commitment to win the war by African Americans, it was not until the end of World War II that racial barriers in the Armed Forces began to be reduced. While Section 4(A) of the 1940 Draft Act clearly banned discrimination against any person on account of race or color, African Americans, both male and female, were segregated and prevented from participating fully in integrated combat units and on battle vessels. Yet, when presented with the challenge, African Americans proved time and again their courage, worthiness and ability to handle weapons of war in situations on land, at sea, or in the air.

On June 25, 1941, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802, establishing the Fair Employment Practices Commission to lead the way in erasing discrimination over color or race through full participation in the defense program, including the Armed Forces. However, segregation against African Americans in the Armed Forces was not eliminated until Executive Order 9981 was issued several years later, by President Harry S. Truman, on July 26, 1948.

Service in Combat and Support Units

During World War II, African Americans served in combat and support units in every branch of the military. Of the more than 2.5 million African Americans registered for the draft about 909,000 served in the Army. In 1944, the Army, constrained by a 10 percent quota, reached its peak enlistment for African Americans with more than 700,000.

Although African Americans were trained for combat on the same basis as other Americans, they saw limited action. The majority of the soldiers, 78 percent, were in the service branches which included quartermaster, engineer, and transportation corps. By Nov. 30, 1944, almost 45 percent, 93,292 of the 210,209 African Americans in the European Theater of operations, were in the Quartermaster Corps.

Some exploits and contributions of African Americans in the U.S. Army and Air Force are particularly noteworthy. Approximately 73 percent of the truck companies in the Motor Transport Service were black. Known as the Red Ball Express, these drivers participated in the transporting of goods and supplies required for American and other Allied forces to advance against the Germans.

Another significant African American unit was the Tuskegee Airmen whose accomplishments to the war effort are legendary. Created by the Civilian Pilot Training Act of 1939, the Tuskegee Training Program at the Tuskegee Institute, Ala., trained by early 1941, approximately 1,000 "Tuskegee Airmen." Tuskegee Institute was the only training facility for black pilots until the flying program closed in 1946.

Other units distinguishing themselves included the 777th and 999th Field Artillery battalions. The 761st Tank Battalion was the first black armored unit to go into combat action. The 93rd Division was the only black division to see service in the Pacific. Although never used in combat, the 555th Parachute Infantry Company was noted for its specialized training.

Women’s Role, Contributions

Black women also served with distinction in various capacities. In January 1941, the U.S. Army established a quota of 56 black nurses for admission to the Army Nurse Corps. Through the efforts of the National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses (NACGN), the Army quota was abolished before the end of the war.

The Honorable Frances Payne Bolton, congresswoman from Ohio, introduced in June 1943, an amendment in Congress that barred racial bias in the Nurse Training Bill. Through this new amendment, more than 2,000 black students enrolled in the U.S.
Cadet Nurse Corps. By late July 1945, there were 512 black women in the Army's Nurse Corps, including nine captains and 115 first lieutenants. Of the three units that served overseas, one was a group of 63 black nurses who worked with the 168th Station Hospital in Manchester, England, caring for wounded German prisoners.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt created the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps (WAAC), converted 14 months later to the Women's Army Corps (WAC), when he signed Public Law 554 on May 4, 1942. The commendable service of 800 black women of the 6888th Postal Battalion in the European Theater of Operations helped unravel the enormous snag that had developed in the delivery of mail to servicemen and women.

The Navy repealed the color ban on Jan. 25, 1945, permitting black women to enlist in the Navy Nurse Corps. On March 9, 1945, Phyllis Mae Day of New York City became the first black female to serve in the Navy's Nurse Corps. Only four black women nurses, of almost 11,000 Navy nurses, served during the war.

In the summer of 1944, black women were permitted entry to the Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES). By July 1945, 72 black WAVES had been trained in a fully integrated and racially progressive program.

The Coast Guard lifted the color ban on black women for enlistment in the Coast Guard's women's auxiliary (SPARS) on Oct. 20, 1945, one day after the Navy's announcement. The Auxiliary recruited only five African Americans during the war. The Marine Corps' women's auxiliary admitted no African Americans during World War II.

Eliminating Racial Barriers at Sea
There were approximately 167,000 African Americans who served in the Navy during World War II; 123,000 served overseas. Approximately 12,500 served in the Sea Bees (construction battalions). On Jan. 9, 1942, President Roosevelt directed the Navy to determine something that the black enlistees could do in addition to the duties associated with the rank of messmen. Shortly thereafter, the Navy decided to accept volunteers for general service, but even then they were prohibited from going to sea.

In 1943, a submarine chaser (PC 1264) and a destroyer escort (USS Mason) were staffed with predominately black crews. Initially, all officers and petty officers were white, but on the submarine chaser that petty officers were replaced with African Americans about six months after commissioning. One officer on this ship, Ensign Samuel L. Gravel, Jr., eventually became the first black flag officer in the Navy. In all, some 60 African Americans would receive Navy commissions during the war.

On Aug. 26, 1942, the first contingent of black Marines began recruit training at the 51st Composite Defense Battalion at Montford Point, N.C., under the command of Col. Samuel A. Gravely.

Military Accomplishments
African Americans received most military awards given by the nation for bravery and valor. Because of limited combat experience and unwarranted perceptions of black inability, the Medal of Honor was not awarded to any African American. However, just prior to the U.S. entry into WW II Oct. 25, 1940, Benjamin O. Davis, Sr. was promoted to brigadier general, the first African American to be appointed to general grade officer in the history of the regular U.S. Army.

Sources
Lee, Ulysses. The United States Army in World War II. Special Studies: The Employment of Negro Troops. 1946.
Putney, Martha. When the Nation Was in Need: Blacks in the Women's Army Corps During World War II. 1992.
Research by Capt. Karl Mahnken and Dr. Cynthia Neverdon-Morton.
The Black American Becomes a Fighting Airman

Blacks had been attempting to gain entrance into the Army Air Corps since World War I. Senators Harry Swartz of Wyoming and Styles Bridges of New Hampshire were in the forefront of those in Congress who championed the cause of blacks to serve in the Air Corps.

Public Law 18, approved April 3, 1939, provided for the large-scale expansion of the Air Corps, with one section of the law authorizing the establishment of training programs in black colleges to employ blacks in various areas of Air Corps support services.

One such college was designated as a training center for black pilots and support personnel. Race and color were not the only barriers that blacks faced in pursuit of training in the Air Corps. The fact that there were no blacks to train meant that there must be an element of racial integration in the training program to get started.

On Jan. 16, 1941, the War Department announced the formation of the 99th Pursuit Squadron, a black flying unit, to be trained at Tuskegee, Ala., the home of the Tuskegee Institute. In the same month of January, the Secretary of the Army announced that, since there were no black officers in the Air Corps, 11 white officers would be assigned the duty of training 429 enlisted men and 47 officers as the first black military personnel in the flying school. Thus the "Lonely Eagles," as the black pilots were to call themselves, became a reality.

World War II Achievements

The 99th Pursuit Squadron which was later named the 99th Fighter Squadron, fought throughout the Mediterranean and European Theaters and became a respected group of fighter pilots. Perhaps the unit's greatest claims to fame were: (1) as a bomber escort group that protected American bombers on their missions deep into Europe, the 332nd, which the 99th was assigned, never lost a bomber to enemy fighters; and (2) the unit was responsible for the formation of several other black Air Corps units, including fighter, bomber and composite squadrons and groups.

In June of 1943, Lieutenant Charles Hall of Indiana became the first member of the 99th to shoot down a German plane. He was personally congratulated by General Eisenhower who was in the area at the time.

From the inception of the 99th through the period that signaled the ending of World War II (1945), the following numbers of black combat flyers completed their training:

- 673 as single-engine pilots;
- 253 as twin-engine pilots;
- 58 as liaison field artillery officers;
- 132 as navigators.

The bulk of black flyers were in the 332nd Fighter Group, which consisted of the 99th Fighter Squadron; the 100th Fighter Squadron; the 301st Fighter Squadron; the 302nd Fighter Squadron; the 616th Bombardment Squadron; the 617th Bombardment Squadron; the 618th Bombardment Squadron and the 619th Bombardment Squadron.

There was also the 477th Bombardment Group (medium), which consisted of the 99th Fighter Squadron; the 616th Bombardment Squadron; the 617th Bombardment Squadron; and the 619th Bombardment Squadron. The bombardment squadrons were equipped with B-26 aircraft and later with B-25s.

Campaigns of the 332nd Fighter Squadron included Sicily; Naples-Foggia; Anzio; Rome-Arno; Normandy; Northern France; Southern France; North Apennines; Rhineland; Central Europe; Po Valley; Air Combat-EAME Theatre.

Decorations of the 99th Fighter Squadron were Distinguished Unit Citations for Sicily, June-July, 1943; Cassino, May 12-14, 1944; Germany, March 24, 1945.
Combat Record of Black Airmen

June 9, 1945

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Awards:
- Legion of Merit: 1
- Silver Star: 1
- Soldier Medal: 2
- Purple Heart: 8
- Distinguished Flying Cross: 95
- Bronze Star: 14
- Air Medal and Clusters: 744

(Binary number of Distinguished Flying Crosses awarded to black pilots estimated at 150, according to Charles E. Francis, The Tuskegee Airman, 1988)

Charles B. Hall

First Victory

Charles B. Hall, Brazil, Ind., became the first black fighter pilot to down an enemy aircraft July 21, 1943. While escorting B-25 bombers over Italy on his eighth mission, Hall spotted two Focke-Wulf Fw190s approaching after the bombers had dropped their bombs on the enemy-held Castelvetrano airfield. He quickly maneuvered into the space between the bombers and fighters and turned inside the Fw190s. Hall fired a long burst at one of the Fw 190s as it turned left. After several hits, the aircraft fell off and crashed into the ground.

Hall earned the respect of his squadron mates with his boldness and flying skill. Before he ended his combat tour—flying P-40s—Hall downed a total of three enemy aircraft.

Hall received the Distinguished Flying Cross for being the first black to shoot down a German aircraft.

Tuskegee Airmen: More Than Just Pilots

Although the primary mission of the Tuskegee Airmen's first flying unit was flying, not all of the unit's assigned personnel were to be trained as pilots.

Of the initial personnel to be trained at the Tuskegee training facility, 210 enlisted and 33 officers were assigned as pursuit squadron personnel; 160 enlisted and 10 officers were assigned to the base group detachment; 20 enlisted and two officers were assigned to weather and communications duties and 39 enlisted and two officers were assigned to services duties.

Sources

Create a visual timeline using the following people, places and events

First Black Great Migration
Great depression
New Deal
Oscar DePriest elected to the House of Representatives
Formation of the Black Cabinet
Mary McLeod Bethune founder Bethune-Cookman University
Formation of the (STFU)
Scottsboro Boys conflict
Double V –WW2
NCAAP leaders A Phillip Randolph and Walter White (WAVES)
Ninety-Five Fighter Squadron
Benjamin O Davis

Performance of Understanding: Use the Fact Sheet/Primary source

1. Explain how the Great Depression affected African Americans differently from other Americans?
2. What opportunities did African Americans expect during WW2?
3. Explain the term Double V victory?
4. What actually changed for African Americans during this time period?
5. What were the major causes of racial tension in the early 1940’s resulting in 242 conflicts in 47 cities?
6. List and explain how African American WW1 soldiers were treated differently from African American WW2 soldiers?
7. Interpret the role of A Phillip Randolph assisting with civil rights movement?

8. Explain the Executive Order 8802?

9. Why was Eleanor Roosevelt key to the civil rights movement?

10. Examine and explain the accomplishments of Doris (Dorie) Miller?

11. Explain Executive Order 9981?

12. The majority of African Americans didn’t see combat, list the main roles of African Americans during WW2?

13. Define the following acronyms (NACGN) (WAAC) (WAVES) all relate to Black Woman serving in World War 2.

14. Identify the first African American promoted to brigadier general?

15. Examine Combat Records of Black Airmen List 5 facts and 5 opinions from the facts.

16. First African American to receive the Distinguished Flying Cross?

17-20. Write a letter to the newspaper editor assessing whether or not WW2 was actual a watershed moment for African Americans?