WORLD WAR II AND AFRICAN AMERICANS
(1941-1945)

When December 7, 1941, dawned over the U.S. naval base in Hawaii's Pearl Harbor, Dorie Miller was below decks of the battleship *West Virginia.* He was sorting laundry, part of his job as a mess attendant, a worker in the ship's kitchen. Suddenly, he heard bombs exploding above his head. He rushed up on deck, where he saw Japanese aircraft attacking the ship. Amid the noise and confusion of the attack, he spotted his captain lying wounded on the deck. Quickly, Miller dragged him to safety.

Then, although he'd never handled a machine gun before, Miller seized a gun and began firing at the planes zooming in for attack. He shot down four. Although the ship began to sink, he continued firing until an officer ordered him to leave the ship.

Five months later, Dorie Miller, the first hero of World War II, was awarded the Navy Cross for his bravery. However, Miller's job in the navy did not change. He was still only a mess attendant—just like most other African Americans in the navy at that time.

In the Armed Forces

In 1941, Tuskegee Institute had become a training base for African American fliers. The 99th Pursuit Squadron, which was attached to the 332nd Fighter Group, earned the name "Black Eagles" because of the success it had in escorting all-white bomber crews over Europe during the war.

By the end of the war, the Eagles had destroyed or damaged about 400 enemy aircraft yet never lost a bomber. In 1945, the 332nd Fighter Group was awarded a Distinguished Unit Citation. Together, the 99th Pursuit Squadron and the 332nd Fighter Group won 800 air medals and clusters.

Employment

Defense industries—aircraft, shipbuilding, iron and steel, and others—needed workers to make sure that African Americans would get their fair share of the new jobs, union leader A. Philip Randolph threatened to organize a massive march on Washington in May 1941. Only then did the government act. The following month, President Roosevelt set up the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) to end discrimination in defense industries.

The increase in war production provided good jobs for African Americans. Around two million worked in aircraft factories, steel mills, and shipyards. For the first time, African-American women were able to find jobs other than as domestic servants and farm laborers. They joined the war effort by taking positions in factories.

(4) The 761st Tank Battalion won 891 awards for 188 days of combat, the longest period any unit ever served under constant enemy fire without relief. The 761st knocked out 881 German machine-gun nests occupied by German soldiers and captured a German radio station.

(5) The 94th Infantry lost more than 3,000 men. They won 65 Silver Stars, 65 Bronze Medals, and more than 1,200 Purple Hearts.

Continuing Segregation and Discrimination

(6) Segregation was still the rule, however. African Americans and whites did not serve in the same units, nor did African American officers command white troops.

Through the Storm

(7) In 1941, African American labor leader A. Philip Randolph organized a march of 100,000 people on Washington, D.C., to protest the exclusion of African Americans from the defense industry. Walter White, the NAACP executive secretary, and Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., a New York City representative to the U.S. Congress, were among those who joined Randolph's effort. The threat of a protest march of this size was enough to move President Franklin Roosevelt to issue Executive order 8802 prohibiting employers from discriminating against African Americans in the war industries. But the order did not address hiring practices, so it had no effect on employers who hired only whites as long as they could get away with it.

Tensions Abroad

(8) On Christmas Eve 1944, a serious riot occurred on the island of Guam in the capital city of Agana. The island had been taken from Japanese by African American and white units. Though these units were segregated, they often came into contact with each other in the capital city of Agana.

Christmas Eve on the African American base began on a peaceful note. A group of nine African American soldiers had received passes (special permission) to go into Agana. The soldiers left the base excited at the prospect of a fun-filled leave from their army duties. When they arrived in the city, the African Americans soldiers began talking to the Asian women there. Some of the white soldiers grew resentful and opened fire on the African American soldiers, driving them out of the town. Eight of the soldiers arrived back at the camp safely; the ninth was feared wounded or killed. Some 40 African Americans then loaded two truck and drove into the town looking for the missing soldier. An African American soldier who had been left behind on the base telephoned the military police in Agana and warned them that the 40 soldiers were headed toward the city. The all-white U.S. military police blockaded all the roads leading to the city. When they spotted the African American soldiers, they told them that the missing soldier had not been killed or wounded but had hidden in a ditch until nightfall and had returned to the camp. The African Americans turned their trucks around and headed back to their camp.

Shortly after midnight on Christmas morning, a truck filled with white marines entered the segregated African American camp. The whites claimed that one of their soldiers had been hit with a piece of coral thrown by one of the African Americans. Instead of arresting the men who were shouting threats at the soldiers from the truck, the white commanding officer of the African American company pleaded with the whites to leave. They finally left.

Tensions remained high all during Christmas Day. Two drunken white marines shot and killed an African American soldier who was walking from the town of Agana back to his camp. Within hours, another African American soldier was shot by another drunken white soldier in Agana. Word about the killings reached all quarters of the four African American units at the camp. Anger boiled over on both sides. Around midnight, a jeep filled with whites fired on the African American camp. Guards in the camp returned the fire, injuring a white military-police officer. The whites in the jeep took cover and fled toward Agana. The African Americans followed in quick pursuit. They were stopped at a roadblock, arrested, and charged with unlawful assembly, rioting, theft of government property, and attempted murder.

On the Home Front

On July 25, 1946, four African Americans—two soldiers who were only recently honorably discharged from the United States Army and their wives—were lynched in Walton County, Georgia. Two weeks later, another brutal lynching of an honorably discharged African American soldier occurred in Minden, Louisiana. It was revealed later that the former soldier had refused to give a white man a war souvenir that he had brought back from overseas. For this refusal, he lost his life to a mob of whites.

AFRICAN AMERICAN: RESPONSES

Contributions

1. Dorie Miller shot down 4 Japanese planes at Pearl Harbor

2. Tuskegee Airmen, 600 black pilots; 200 missions, no losses

3. Labor in factories for war production

4. 761st Tank Batallion (Black Panthers) received 891 awards for 185 days of continuous battle

5. 94th Infantry had 1200 Purple Hearts, 65 Silver, 65 Bronze Stars

PROBLEMS

6. Served under segregated and discriminatory conditions

7. ASA Philip Randolph pressured FDR to issue Executive Order 8802, banned discrimination in war industries

8. Guam race riot, Christmas Eve 1944

9. Returning vets faced discrimination, lynching at home