

CHAPTER 8

Fire on the Hill: The 2nd Ranger Infantry Company, Integration, and the African American Military Experience

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INTRODUCTION

"Put some fire on the hills!" yelled Sgt. James Freeman to his men. David "Tank" Clarke began firing his BAR machine gun at the waves of approaching North Korean soldiers. Clarke, Freeman, and the rest of the 2nd Ranger Infantry Company were at the front of the U.S. lines in North Korea in January 1951. Surrounded and outgunned by the North Korean and Chinese armies in front of them, Clarke and the others retreated under fire, losing several men. The "Buffalo Rangers," as they referred to themselves, were attached to a large conventional unit and utilized as a stopgap during the massive U.S. retreat.¹ As the only segregated unit in the area and the first and only all-Black Special Forces unit in U.S. history, the 2nd Ranger Infantry Company represents a unique moment in the African American military experience, highlighting both the past of Black military service as well as progress leading both African Americans and the U.S. military forward. With the Buffalo Rangers as a unique end point, the entire corpus of African American military service illustrates a timeline of stunted progress, racial discrimination, and moments of success and recognition. African Americans have served in military conflicts dating back to colonial times, and evidence of Black soldiers is prevalent in early conflicts like the American Revolution and the War of 1812. Starting with the U.S.

¹ "Command Report of the 32nd Infantry Regiment of the 7th Infantry Division for the Period of 1 to 31 January 1951." Records of the Historical Services Division; Records of the Office of the Chief of Military History; Records of the Army Staff; Record Group 319; National Archives, College Park, Maryland. Hereafter referred to as *NARA*.

Civil War, an in-depth examination of African American military experience offers an additional narrative in the greater Black Freedom Struggle.

THE CIVIL WAR

March 1863 saw the U.S. Civil War entering its second full year, and with the release of the Emancipation Proclamation just a few months prior, the war was given a new foundation and cause. A simple and powerful argument put forth by Frederick Douglass captures the gravity of African American service in the war to end slavery: "A war undertaken and brazenly carried for the perpetual enslavement of the colored men, calls logically and loudly for the colored men to help suppress it." Standing proud in Rochester, New York, Douglass delivered a thunderous challenge to free Blacks in the North: "Who would be free themselves must strike the blow."² Referring to the recent decision to recruit, arm, and employ African American soldiers in the ongoing Civil War, Douglass made an impassioned call to arms. African Americans were called to stand and fight in the very conflict that was defining their humanity and place in U.S. society.

Abraham Lincoln's issuing of the Emancipation Proclamation in January 1863 ended slavery in the United States, at least in rhetoric and purpose, and re-defined the Civil War with one clear and uninterrupted purpose.³ Shortly after, the U.S. military looked to harness that new purpose and a yet untapped reserve of manpower: free African Americans living in the Northern states. With the issue of General Orders No.

² Douglass, Frederick. "Men of Color, to Arms!" Rochester, NY: March 21, 1863. Frederick Douglass Project, University of Rochester. <http://rbscp.lib.rochester.edu/4372>.

³ Following the Union "victory" at Antietam in September 1862 and the passing of the Union Army confiscation acts throughout 1862, Lincoln issued the proclamation on January 1, 1863. The proclamation ended slavery in 10 Southern states, but because of their open state of rebellion the announcement had little tangible effect outside the ideological implications. Until this point in the war, the Union had not unequivocally argued that the war was to end slavery. For further reading on the Emancipation and Lincoln, see: Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012).

143, the United States Army established the Bureau of Colored Troops, further sparking recruitment and training of African American soldiers. Eventually numbering close to 200,000 in strength and making up 10 percent of Union forces, the inclusion of Black troops in the Union Army proved crucial as the war began to shift towards a Union victory.

U.S. Colored Troops (USCT) Regiments served in segregated units and were almost unanimously led by White officers. Initially paid less than their White counterparts, these new units took on all manner of military jobs. USCT regiments served in infantry, cavalry, artillery, and engineering roles and represented every state of the Union by the end of the war. On top of limited advancement opportunities, African American regiments were routinely tasked with forming the center of frontal assaults and other highly dangerous jobs. Fighting against a perceived lack of combat ability by their White counterparts and military commanders, the USCT regiments time and time again proved their worth in battles like Port Hudson, Fort Wagner, Fort Pillow, and Chaffin's Farm as the war pushed to a close. In addition to the dangerous positions on the battlefield, these men faced further peril in the prospect of capture. Confederate soldiers and officers routinely did not extend the rights of prisoners to surrendering African American soldiers. Infamously at the Battle of the Crater in July 1864, Confederate soldiers bayoneted and shot Black soldiers who had already surrendered.⁴ Easily the most famous example of USCT regiments in action is the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment. Serving from March 1863 to the end of the war, these men represented the first official African American regiment in the Union Army. Supported by the governor, Frederick Douglass, and the stout abolitionist community of Boston, the 54th received more potential recruits than it actually needed. Led by a White abolitionist officer, Robert Gould Shaw, these men served as inspiration for other forming units. Participating in the Battle at Fort Wagner in July 1863, the 54th furthered its image by bravely storming stout Confederate defensive works at the center of the fray. One young man, William Carney, would eventually be awarded the Medal of Honor

⁴ John F. Schmutz, *The Battle of the Crater: A Complete History* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland Press, 2009), 255-257.

for his actions in heroically carrying the American flag over the ramparts in what would end in a losing effort. While fighting the Confederates, these men also fought for themselves, securing equal pay a full year after their enlistment. At the Battle of Olustee, the men famously chanted "Massachusetts and Seven Dollars a Month!" in reference to their receiving only half of what their White counterparts received. Through protest on their behalf and Congressional action, the men of the 54th were compensated for the pay disparity in September 1864.⁵

As the Civil War came to a close in April 1865 and the U.S. turned to Reconstruction, African Americans had played a varying and visible role in the conflict. Outside of the Union regiments, many African Americans toiled exhaustively in the manual labor jobs that supported Union forces in the field. As armies moved through the Confederacy, many of the slaves that were emancipated attached themselves and helped however they could. On the other side of the conflict, Confederate states utilized slave labor in a great variety of roles in support of the war effort. Several prominent Confederate leaders even argued for the arming of slaves near the end of the war, a plan that was put into motion in the final days of the war. From traditional agricultural roles to unique tasks such as hospital attendants and even soldiers, the Confederate war time labor force reflected the society from which it sprang.⁶

THE FRONTIER AND IMPERIALISM

⁵ The 54th Massachusetts served with distinction until the end of the war in April 1865, fighting effectively in both offensive and defensive operations. The legacy of the 54th served as a massive point of pride for the African American community in the North during the post-war era, being memorialized in a famous monument on the Boston Commons in the 1880s. For further reading on the 54th Mass., see: Sarah Greenough and Nancy K. Anderson, *Tell it with Pride: The 54th Massachusetts Regiment and Augustus Saint-Gaudens' Shaw Memorial* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).

⁶ Bruce Levine, *Confederate Emancipation: Southern Plans to Free and Arm Slaves during the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

As the United States moved on from the Civil War and faced industrialization, the closing of the frontier, and its first forays into imperialism, African American soldiers remained visible yet segregated elements of American military excursions. Transitioning into the relative peacetime following the war, several African American regiments shifted towards frontier duty. Supposedly nicknamed the "Buffalo Soldiers" by the Comanche in 1871 for their toughness in combat and their tight Black curly hair, these men fought on horseback, guarded mail shipments, and even built roads across the American West. During this period African American soldiers pushed for further inclusion in U.S. military institutions and for equal treatment by their peers. In 1877 a young former slave became the first African American to graduate from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. Henry Flipper was commissioned as a lieutenant and served in one of the Buffalo Soldier cavalry units on the frontier. Facing discriminatory treatment at West Point as well as during his command on the frontier, Flipper built a positive reputation as a competent officer with those around him. His career was upended when a racist officer at Fort Davis framed Flipper for embezzling money.⁷

The Buffalo Soldiers pressed on in their service as the United States entered the world stage at the end of the nineteenth century. The U.S. frontier closed in 1890, largely ending the country's tradition of expansion, settlement, and conflict with natives that had come to define the national culture and character since the early colonial period. As this transition occurred, the U.S. focus turned outward to the world. With the annexation of Hawaii and other strategic locations around the world, the United States entered into an imperial phase. No event is more important in this conversation than the Spanish American War in 1898. Fought under the auspices of freeing the Cuban people from tyrannical Spanish rule, this conflict firmly places the U.S. on the world stage. As American military forces ventured to foreign lands on "civilizing missions," the

⁷ For further reading on the Buffalo Soldiers see Bruce A. Glasrud and Michael N. Searles, *Buffalo Soldiers in the West: A Black Soldiers Anthology* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2007); Frank N. Schubert, *Voices of the Buffalo Soldier: Records, Reports, and Recollections of Military Life and Service in the West* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008).

racial division of American society continued its rampant and hypocritical display in its armed forces.⁸

In both the Spanish American War (1898-1899) and the ensuing Philippine American War (1899-1902), African Americans served in segregated units alongside their White counterparts. A large number of these units mustered into existence under the formation of the American Volunteer Army. This force was raised as the war with Spain was coming into focus, in an attempt to augment the size of the small American professional army of the time. Perhaps most infamous among the African American regiments of the war were the so-called "Immunes." Recruited specifically from Southern states, these units and their men were hand-picked for service in the climate of Cuba for their perceived resistance to tropical illnesses. Pushed by Black leaders like Booker T. Washington, the idea that African American men were resistant to Yellow Fever led to the creation of ten such "immune" infantry regiments for the war effort. In a stark departure from army doctrines of the past, a large number of the lower level officers would be African American.⁹

In the field African American regiments served with distinction, earning numerous accolades and awards. In perhaps the most famous battle of the war in Cuba at San Juan Hill, African American soldiers played a central yet largely unknown part in the significant American victory. Fighting alongside Teddy Roosevelt's "Rough Riders," a specially recruited and independent cavalry unit, soldiers of several African American units formed the core of the main attack up the hill. Seen largely as the climactic victory of the war, Roosevelt's part receives the lion's share of the press and discussion concerning San Juan Hill.¹⁰ During the conflict, both in Cuba and stateside, African

⁸ For further reading on America's entrance into Imperialism see Paul Kramer, *The Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States, and the Philippines* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

⁹ Roger D. Cunningham, *The Black "Immune" Regiments in the Spanish-American War*. Army Historical Foundation. 2015.

¹⁰ Contemporary sources focused solely on the accounts of Roosevelt and his men, in particular a famous article series in *Scribner's* magazine. Theodore Roosevelt, "The Rough Riders" *Scribner's*, Vol. 25, January-June 1899, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1899).

American regiments faced racist and discriminatory treatment from civilians and White military forces. While training and recruiting for an Immunes regiment in Macon, Georgia, several bouts of violence occurred when the community refused to lift Jim Crow segregation laws for the men in uniform. The prevalent mistreatment boiled over time and time again, creating visible public riots and fights. Nowhere was this more prevalent than in the country's next conflict in the Philippines.

Following the conclusion of the war with Spain, the United States moved to consolidate control over former Spanish colonial holdings like the Philippines. Filipino soldiers who had recently helped the United States defeat the Spanish in the Philippines immediately resisted U.S. control, igniting the Philippine American War. A harsh war of guerrilla ambushes and counterinsurgency tactics, the war in the Philippines was much more violent and destructive than the one in Cuba had ever been. Several African American regiments arrived in the area to help suppress the so-called "Filipino Insurrection," one of which was the 24th Infantry Regiment. As one of the earliest Buffalo Soldier units, the 24th had a long history of serving as a segregated unit. Through the war in Cuba and now in the Philippines, these men faced racial slurs and discriminatory treatment every day. In the Philippines, the men of the 24th witnessed the Filipino people endure similar racial discrimination and harsh treatment for defending their independence. Facing the prospect of squashing that rebellion as a "civilizing mission" did not sit well with many men of the 24th. Chief among them was David Fagen, who eventually disagreed so thoroughly that he deserted the U.S. Army and began fighting alongside the Filipinos.

David Fagen and six other African American soldiers left the U.S. military during the conflict and joined the Filipino resistance. Neither Black soldiers nor Black community leaders at home agreed with subjugating another race of people. Racial slurs commonly used against African Americans were commonly used against the Filipino *insurrectos*, a notion that highlighted the still pervasive issues facing a segregated American military. Labelled a traitor for his actions in fighting against the

U.S., Fagen reached such a high profile that a bounty was placed upon his head.¹¹ Fagen, his fellow deserters, and other African Americans serving in the Philippines fought against and in a segregated military that valued their lives and skills at a lower level than White soldiers. As the twentieth century dawned, the American military and the society it represented had a long way to go.

THE WORLD WARS

As the world plunged into the First World War in the summer of 1914, the United States prepared to hold itself and its people out of the fray. Following years of isolationism and growing tensions, the United States finally joined the war alongside England and France in 1917. As the American Expeditionary Force prepared for war, once again the nation would fight as a segregated force. Unlike former conflicts, during the 1910s race relations in the U.S. forced African Americans wishing to serve their country backwards. American military and social thought of the period deemed African Americans unworthy of combat roles, and instead pushed Black soldiers into menial labor and support jobs.

The major exception to the norm was the 369th Infantry Regiment of the New York National Guard. More commonly referred to as the "Harlem Hellfighters," this group of soldiers sparked a movement back in the States. Facing discrimination and segregation during training and transport to Europe, the 369th was continually threatened with losing their combat status. Once in Europe, the U.S. Army continued to push its systematic, divisive, and discriminatory behavior, releasing a pamphlet warning French civilians about the "dangers" of the Black soldier. The men were eventually

¹¹ The fate of David Fagen is still up for debate. His bounty was claimed using a decomposing body found in the Philippines, but rumors abound that he survived the war and lived out his life peacefully. For further reading on David Fagen's life and African Americans in the Philippine conflict see *The Philippine War—A Conflict of Conscience for African Americans*. National Park Service. <https://www.nps.gov/prsf/learn/historyculture/the-philippine-insurrectiothe-philippine-war-a-conflict-of-consciencen-a-war-of-controversy.htm>, last accessed 2/20/2018.

assigned to a French Army as American generals refused to send White soldiers to fight under another nation's flag and command.

Wearing American uniforms, French helmets, and utilizing French weapons, the men of the 369th served under French leadership for the totality of their combat experience. Facing no discrimination or segregation, the men took part in numerous famous battles of the war's final months, including the second battle of the Marne and the Meuse-Argonne offensive. Several of the Hellfighters were recognized for their service both during the war and in the years following. Private Henry Johnson was awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously decades later for an infamous moment in which he and one other man prevented a German raid numbering more than twenty men with little more than their rifles and a bolo knife. The entire regiment received a citation from the French military and over 170 individuals earned the *Croix de Guerre*, a French recognition of valor.¹²

The men of the 369th Infantry returned home emboldened by their service and sacrifice on the world's stage. The new image and attitude of these men served as a foundation for the blossoming Harlem Renaissance. A period of unprecedented economic and educational growth among the African American community in cities like New York and Chicago, the moment pushed the Black community fully out of the shadow of slavery and saw the emergence of the "New Negro," an image of cosmopolitan sophistication and artistic achievement. Nowhere is that more expressed than in the works of the movement itself. Poems like Claude McKay's "If We Must Die" and W.E.B. DuBois' "Returning Soldiers" reference the fighting spirit of the Harlem Hellfighters and the need to continue to fight against injustice and discrimination at home.¹³

¹² The Harlem Hellfighters enjoy a rich historiography that is growing each year as this pivotal unit is highlighted. For further reading on the 369th see Arthur Barbeau and Florette Henri, *The Unknown Soldiers: African American Troops in World War I* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1974); Jeffrey Sammons and John Morrow, *Harlem's Rattlers and the Great War: The Undaunted 369th Regiment and the African American Quest for Equality* (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 2014).

¹³ Nathan Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

As the military mobilized in the years leading up to the Second World War, the conversation about African Americans in the military garnered serious thought and planning. Wanting to avoid the issues of discrimination and disproportionate representation from the First World War, planners looked to build a balanced and more representative military that included African Americans in all arenas of service.¹⁴ Progress was achieved in special cases, but for the vast majority of African Americans serving in the war, familiar issues of limited opportunity and racial discrimination remained prevalent. The vast majority of African Americans that served their country in World War II did so in non-combat and support roles. Most men worked as cooks, janitors, truck drivers, or stevedores. Four African American women joined the war effort, serving as nurses in the U.S. Navy. Phyllis Mae Dailey became the first African American woman to serve in March 1945.

A select number of African Americans served in combat roles during World War II despite rampant racist sentiments among U.S. major and general grade leadership. The most famous example of African American combat experience lies with the Tuskegee Airmen. Officially the 332nd Fighter Group of the U.S. Army Air Corps, the Tuskegee Airmen represent the first African American aviators in American military history. Named for the distinctive red tails of their aircraft, these men flew escort missions with U.S. bombers over the Mediterranean and mainland Europe. In contrast to the well-known Tuskegees, the relatively unknown 452nd Anti-Aircraft Artillery Battalion served as an all-African American unit in every Allied land campaign in Europe. One of the seldom highlighted examples of African American combat units during World War II is the 761st Tank Battalion. Raised in 1942, the 761st faced discrimination and continuous obstacles before seeing any combat. During their unusually long training cycle, which lasted nearly two years, the men of the "Black Panthers" were harassed and goaded into racially fueled fights with White enlisted men and military police.¹⁵ The

¹⁴ Ulysses Lee, *The Employment of Negro Troops* (Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Military History U.S. Army, 1966), p. 49-50.

¹⁵ According to U.S. Army records and studies, the U.S. Army believed that due to inherent combat abilities and educational standards, it was necessary to extend training

most famous of the early tankers was Jackie Robinson, who went on to integrate major league baseball but also faced severe hardship and near court-martial for refusing to give up a seat on a bus. Upon receiving a superior rating, the men were shipped to England and joined General George Patton's 3rd Army upon direct request. Patton's perception of the men and the unit at large reflected a great deal of opinions held among American generals. The general never fully accepted the combat abilities of African American soldiers, even though he utilized the 761st extensively in the last seven months of the war. While admiring their "toughness and courage" in combat, Patton kept a hard ceiling on his appraisal of African American soldiers.¹⁶ Despite discrimination and racialized hardship, the men of the 761st demonstrated their outstanding abilities in combat, earning 296 purple hearts, eleven silver stars, one Medal of Honor, and a presidential unit citation, while taking part in the Battle of the Bulge and the breaking of the Siegfried Line.¹⁷

INTEGRATION AND RESISTANCE

In 1942 an African American newspaper, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, put a name to the energized movement for progress rising within Black America: Double Victory. Inspired by a young reader, the slogan became synonymous with the struggles surrounding African Americans and their service during the war. James Thompson asked the paper

for African American units by up to 100%. This resulted in the 761st training being extended an entire year longer than their White counterparts. Bell I. Wiley, "The Training of Negro Troops" (War Department Special Staff, Historical Division. Historical Section, Army Ground Forces: 1946), p. 56.

¹⁶ Despite a rousing and proto-typical speech from Patton upon the arrival of the 761st in Europe, the general was much more bigoted in private. Arguing that African American soldiers could not "think fast enough to fight in armor," Patton's true feelings were much more closely aligned with the prevailing attitudes of the day in the U.S. military. Carlo D'Este, *Patton: A Genius for War* (Norwalk, CT: Easton Press, 1999), p. 172.

¹⁷ Both the Medal of Honor (Staff Sergeant Ruben Rivers) and Presidential citations were awarded much later, in 1997 and 1978, respectively. For further information on the 761st, see Charles W. Sasser, *Patton's Panthers: The African American 761st Tank Battalion in World War II* (New York: Pocket Books, 2004).

in a letter why he should sacrifice his safety for a nation that only allowed him to live "Half American." The resulting slogan and campaign argued that Black service in the war had two visions of victory: one over fascism abroad and the other over discrimination and injustice at home. As the war raged on and African American soldiers fought in tanks, planes, and everywhere in-between, the broader community looked to build upon their sacrifice. A reckoning was coming in U.S. race relations, and Black military service in World War II served as the springboard.¹⁸

Starting well before the outbreak of the war, African American organizations pressed for progress in the U.S. Groups like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Persons (NAACP), National Urban League (NUL), the National Negro Congress (NNC), and others fought against racial injustices and systematic segregation. Both of the World Wars served as catalysts for change as the U.S. population was tasked with supporting massive war efforts. During the Second World War this was more necessary than any other point in American history as some sixteen million Americans would eventually leave the civilian workforce for military service. African American men and women rushed to fill these empty jobs. Changes like this brought on new societal tensions and issues to be addressed. As White and Black Americans came into increasingly close contact working in the defense industry, racialized violence erupted across the nation. Civil rights leaders like A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin proved instrumental in these years, organizing labor unions and eliciting public pressure for anti-discrimination practices. From 1941 to 1946 these men and dozens more created the "March on Washington Movement," calling for tens of thousands of African Americans to march on the nation's capital in support of an integrated military and fair employment practices.¹⁹ The U.S. government made provisional decisions to safeguard these new workers' equality and access to jobs. Executive Order 8802 and the creation of the Fair Employment Practice Committee

¹⁸ Ronald Takaki, *Double Victory: A Multicultural History of America in World War II* (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 2001), 19-23.

¹⁹ David Lucander, *Winning the War for Democracy: The March on Washington Movement, 1941-1946* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014).

(FEPC) in 1941 guaranteed wages and job access against discriminatory practices in war-related industries. These issues were taken up by African American organizations and as the war was coming to an end, pressure mounted for progress in post-war America.²⁰

Harry Truman became the 33rd president of the United States in April 1945 following the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Facing the inexperienced Truman in office was closing out the war in both Europe and the Pacific, crafting the post-war world and alliances, and securing permanent progress for African Americans. Truman briefly served as a senator in Missouri prior to his placement on the 1944 presidential ticket as FDR's vice-president and had a tumultuous voting record on Civil Rights issues. With African Americans working in the factories and serving on the battlefields and increasingly becoming an instrumental voting bloc within the Democratic Party, Truman lay in a unique position to implement a sweeping change to the country's racial dynamic.

During the same month that Truman became president, a landmark event took place in Indiana. At the domestic home of the Tuskegee Airmen in Seymour, the commanding officers of Freeman Field constructed a Whites-only officers' club. This was in direct violation of several Army regulations and directives that disallowed separating such facilities. African American officers of the 477th Medium Bombardment Group attempted to utilize the club on numerous occasions, resulting in multiple nights of arrests. When asked to sign a petition by the White commanding officer allowing the separate facilities, 101 men of the 477th refused. The "Freeman 101" became nationally known, and their fate pulled the attention of the Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall, who very publicly called for the release of all the men. Outside one officer being fined, the incident was a massive victory for African Americans in the military. Many historians point to this moment as the catalyst for further and more dramatic progress on the issues.²¹

²⁰ Takaki, p. 25-38.

²¹ One of the most important volumes on the subject of discrimination and post-war integration is Jon Taylor's *Freedom to Serve*. Picking the story up in the mid-1930s, this

Momentum built quickly in the year 1945 as the world prepped to rebuild itself once again. As groups like the NAACP pushed for progress nationally and internationally, the U.S. Army retreated behind closed doors to evaluate its stance and the future of racial segregation. The War Department's Advisory Committee on Negro Troop Policy served as the principal forum for such discussions. During an initial study, the toxic race relationship within the U.S. Army was laid bare. In a July 1945 report on White officers' opinions on Black effectiveness during combat, two wildly different viewpoints emerged. Higher echelon officers argued that Black soldiers were lazy and lacked purpose in combat, largely attributing this lack of ability to social and racial foundations. Lower echelon officers argued that Black soldiers underperformed due to racist behavior from the higher ranks and the limited arena for promotion and opportunity for Black soldiers in the military. Segregation itself arose as the one constant, and the committee's report recommended the gradual integration of the military as the logical solution.²²

With both societal pressures and logical arguments coming from within the Army about using every available soldier, the case for gradual integration built over the ensuing years. President Truman became increasingly public about Civil Rights issues and his intentions to guarantee U.S. citizens their rights. American society continued through bitter divisiveness, with organizations like the NAACP pushing for progress while many Southern politicians recycled and re-energized old tropes of racial inferiority as a defense against integration efforts in the military and civilian society. International attention grew as the U.S. position in the United Nations garnered the world's eye as issues on human rights took the floor of the new forum. Combined with a looming

work discusses the war, the home front, and all of the political dealings leading up to African American integration in 1948. Jon Taylor, *Freedom to Serve: Truman, Civil Rights, and Executive Order 9981*. (London, Routledge, 2013).

²² War Department. "Opinions About Negro Infantry Platoons in White Companies of 7 Divisions," July 3, 1945. Record Group 220: Records of the President's Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services, Army. Truman Presidential Library.

https://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/desegregation/large/documents/index.php?documentid=10-11&pagenumber=1, last accessed 2/05/2018.

election in the fall, President Truman issued two Executive Orders: 9980 and 9981 in July 1948. The former guaranteed fair employment practices and the latter demanded fair and equal treatment and opportunity for the nation's armed forces.

Executive Order 9981 called for "equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion, or national origin." The order also made possible the creation of a committee to oversee the implementation of the new directive.²³ Even though the Executive Order does not specifically mention integration, Truman made it clear in the following days that this was the intended application. Even though society was still segregated, Truman believed that the U.S. military should and would lead the way on integration and the death of segregation. As the military branches took up this new calling, there was no specific deadline outlined by Truman. The Executive Order changed nothing overnight, but provided the starting line for American military integration. It would not be until America's next conflict when integration would be put to the test.²⁴

KOREA AND THE "BUFFALO RANGERS"

As the Cold War intensified in in the late 1940s between the United States and the Soviet Union, a great number of smaller nations got caught in the ideological struggle. One such nation was Korea. The Korean peninsula was set free after World War II after decades of Japanese occupation. In rebuilding the devastated nation, Korea became the site of the first proxy war of the Cold War. Divided in half between the democratic and the U.S.-allied South and the communist and Soviet-influenced North, the Korean peninsula served as a microcosm of the wider struggle between east and west. A conflict erupted in June 1950 when the communists of North Korea invaded the southern nation in attempt to unify the two countries under a communist regime.

²³ Exec. Order No. 9981, 3 C.F.R. 2 (1948). Truman Presidential Library.
<https://www.trumanlibrary.org/9981.htm>, last accessed July 11, 2019.

²⁴ Taylor. *Freedom to Serve*. 97-100.

Influenced heavily by the Soviet Union and the recently established communist People's Republic of China, the North Korean military rapidly gained territory and threatened to destroy the South Korean nation in a matter of months. Less than a month after the war began, the United Nations voted to intervene on behalf of South Korea with the United States leading the way.²⁵

The U.S. military called to action in 1950 was ill-prepared for war. One of the first U.S. units deployed to Korea was the 24th Infantry Regiment. Serving in Japan as an occupation force in 1950, the 24th remained a completely segregated unit. Led by White officers at the highest echelons, the all-Black unit lacked proper supplies and was not in combat shape when it arrived in Korea. The first several engagements were marked by defeat and retreats. Given the nickname the "Frightened 24th" by U.S. commanders, the men served as an example of all-American units in the opening weeks of the war. The racial lines exacerbated the treatment and perception of the 24th, and later in the war it would become apparent. Lieutenant Leon Gilbert, a ten-year army veteran who had served in World War II, was leading a severely weakened company in retreat when he was ordered on the offensive against a much larger and well-established enemy. Gilbert refused, arguing the order was basically suicide. Gilbert's White commanding officer immediately relieved him of duty and tried him for insubordination and cowardice. The subsequent court martial found Gilbert guilty and sentenced to death. The image of a beleaguered Black junior officer attempting to protect his men against insurmountable odds and a deadly order from a White officer quickly exploded at home. Massive public outcry came to the defense of Gilbert in the form of protests, petitions, and demonstrations. Gilbert's sentence was commuted to twenty years and he eventually served five. Two full years after the Executive Order for

²⁵ For a comprehensive examination of the war in Korea and its foundations see Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War: Liberation and the Emergence of Separate Regimes, 1945-1947* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989).

integration, the military wasted no time in demonstrating its clear lack of progress on the matter.²⁶

While many of the 24th Infantry and the U.S. Army's issues related to race and slow-moving integration policies, the state of the military and its capabilities in 1950 was greatly in flux. The U.S. military of the early Cold War was rapidly transitioning. American strategists and high command envisioned a military that didn't need millions of men in uniform like the recently concluded Second World War. Instead, many forward-thinking commanders envisioned a military that would win wars with strategic bombers and nuclear weapons. In such a military the required ground forces would be small in number but highly trained and capable of accomplishing numerous different tasks.²⁷ One such innovation was American Ranger Companies. Utilized in World War II, these small companies of specially trained individuals were supposedly capable of moving faster and farther than standard infantry units. Designed to conduct raids and lay ambushes, Ranger companies were viewed as more capable than regular soldiers. At the outset of the Korean War, the U.S. Army looked to revive this concept in order to bolster the struggling Army's capabilities. In September 1950, after a successful field test in the U.S. 8th Army, the Army Ranger School was officially established at Fort Benning, Georgia.²⁸

²⁶ The 24th Infantry Regiment is a powerful example of the American military's opening move into Korea. Lack of command cohesion, logistical shortcomings, heavy casualties, and racial tensions massively impacted the 24th's ability to be effective in combat. William Bowers, *Black Soldier, White Army: The 24th Infantry Regiment in Korea*. (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 1997), 120-122.

²⁷ For an in-depth conversation on the shifting thinking in American military planning in the Cold War see Adrian Lewis, *The American Culture of War: A History of US Military Force from World War II to Operation Enduring Freedom* (London: Routledge, 2006).

²⁸ The Army Rangers of World War II were largely experimental. Serving in every theater, each of the WWII Ranger units was trained and employed slightly differently. Each instance reached a differing level of "success" depending on the commander employing them and their individual ideas of what the Rangers were designed to do. No uniform directives or regulations existed and by the end of the war all of the Ranger units had been disbanded. The image of Ranger units conducting high-profile raids persisted as did the large swath of Ranger veterans as the Korean conflict erupted. It was this image that brought the Rangers back and solidified their existence with the

As the Ranger Training program began, a call went out to units both at home and abroad. Pitched as the “toughest, meanest outfit in the U.S. Army” the Rangers were asking for “triple” volunteers. Eligible candidates for Ranger training were volunteers into the Army as there was no ongoing draft, volunteers for airborne and glider schools, and finally, volunteers for combat in Korea. Specifically targeted by these calls was the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Infamous for its actions in World War II, the 82nd was one of the few remaining mainline combat units still stateside. The 82nd had a sizable representation of African American soldiers serving in segregated regiments and battalions within the division, many of which volunteered for the new opportunity. Corporal James Fields was one of the first men from the all-Black 80th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Battalion to volunteer for Ranger School. He had a fascination with groups like Darby’s Rangers and the British Commandos from World War II and desperately wanted to serve in a similar unit.²⁹

African American enthusiasm was high, as 27 percent of the original 491 men to be selected for Ranger training were Black. The new school at Fort Benning was designed as an intensive six-week course focused on small unit cohesion, infiltration, and maneuverability. Physical fitness and orienteering were crucial elements of the schedule. Frequently, the men would take part in twelve, fifteen, or even 24-hour exercises. Pushing soldiers to their physical and mental limits became a calling card of Ranger training in Korea and beyond. Unlike the Rangers of World War II, the new units were organized into separate and individual companies. By mid-October four Ranger companies graduated the course and prepared for deployment. Originally

Ranger School at Fort Benning. For a comprehensive background of the modern American rangers and their sometimes awkward road to acceptance, see David Hogan, *Raiders or Elite Infantry? The Changing Role of the U.S. Army Rangers from Dieppe to Grenada* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1992).

²⁹ The 82nd Airborne maintained three large segregated units: The 758th Tanker Battalion, the 80th AAAB, and the 3rd Battalion of the 505th Infantry Regiment. These units occupied segregated areas of Fort Bragg and the surrounding military posts. Corporal James Field was, by his recollection, the first man in line when volunteers were asked for. Edward Posey, *The US Army’s First, Last, and Only All-Black Rangers: The 2nd Ranger Infantry Company (Airborne) in the Korean War, 1950-1951* (New York: Savas Beatie, 2009), 1-3.

organized as 107 enlisted men and five officers, each unit was attached to a conventional Infantry division once in Korea. The 2nd Ranger Infantry Company was comprised of only African American soldiers. The creation of a segregated Special Forces unit two years after the integration order demonstrates the racial leaning of the Army and the slow pace of integration efforts. During training the men of the 2nd Ranger Company endured racial slurs and had to fight against preconceived notions of inferiority.³⁰ Through perseverance and results, the men graduated and earned high but somewhat condescending praise from some of the very individuals that originally doubted them. Colonel John Van Houten, the head of the Ranger School, remarked on multiple occasions that the 2nd Ranger Company as a segregated unit was the "...best of its type that I have seen."³¹

Deployed to Korea in late December 1950, the men of the 2nd Rangers inherited a very different war than the one they were training for. Attached to the 32nd Regimental Combat Team of the 7th Infantry Division, the Rangers joined the war effort as the People's Republic of China was entering the conflict. Stationed in the remote northeast mountains of North Korea, the Chosin Reservoir witnessed some of the most brutal weather and fighting conditions of the entire Korean War. Originally trained to act as reconnaissance and a screening force for advancing conventional forces, the Rangers joined an army under attack and the auspices of retreat. Suffering heavy casualties at the Battle of Chosin, the 7th Division used the Rangers as a stop gap early on in plugging holes in the lines. They were not trained to serve as line infantry, and this move highlighted further inconsistencies between the Rangers' design and ultimate application in Korea.

"The enemy was everywhere. We opened up with everything we had, and we really poured it on," Herman Jackson recalled about one of the first contacts with the enemy after the 2nd Rangers arrived. It was past three in the morning and the incoming

³⁰ "Ranger History—314.7," Box 10, Ranger Training Center, Infantry Center: General Records 1950-51. Record Group 337, National Archives Records Administration II. College Park, MD, *NARA*.

³¹ Van Houston to Bolte, 13 November 1950, Section I, G-3 Ranger Records, Korean War, Box 380, RG 319, *NARA*.

Chinese soldiers had given their position away when Jackson and the other Rangers heard the ice of a nearby frozen river cracking. When the short firefight subsided and the casualties were counted, the Rangers viewed close to fifty Chinese bodies in the immediate vicinity. Jackson and his fellow Buffalo Rangers had been in Korea for only a week.³² The battles at Tanyang Pass would become a familiar experience for the Rangers, and as the war raged forward, the unit was consistently misused by its commanders.

Throughout the month of January in 1951 the Rangers suffered mightily, experiencing heavy casualties in combat while battling the extreme cold of the Korean winter. In the worst moments of the mountain environment of Chosin, the temperatures dipped into the negative forties. Frostbite and other illness incapacitated countless U.S. soldiers fighting along the front lines. Following their first month in combat the 2nd Ranger Company numbered only 67 healthy men, whittled down from their original 121 that deployed to Korea. Several of the men were recommended for citations, like James Fields and McBert Higginbotham, for their actions near Tanyang.³³

Fields and the other Rangers of the 2nd Company were hit hard by their use on the front lines. Nearly half of their first month in combat, they were placed in infantry roles against Chinese and North Korean attacks. The Ranger companies of Korea were designed to be fast-moving reconnaissance and anti-guerrilla units. As such they were smaller than standard line companies and lacked the proper firepower necessary for prolonged combat. Specially trained Ranger soldiers were being wounded and killed while completing the job of regular infantrymen, in essence wasting their training. This issue was greatly exacerbated when in early February the commanding general of X Corps, the command containing the 7th Infantry Division and the 2nd Rangers, issued a long-reaching order on replacement soldiers. Major General Ned Almond ordered that despite the integration orders of the U.S. Army, his command would send all African

³² "Recollections of Herman Jackson," Posey, 146-151. The Battle of Tanyang Pass saw the Rangers suffer their first casualty in Sergeant First Class Isaac Baker. The initial contact occurred during the early morning hours of January 8, 1951.

³³ "Recollections of James F. Fields." Posey, *All-Black Rangers*, 160-165; David Hogan Jr., *Raiders or Elite Infantry*, 49.

American replacement soldiers into the 2nd Ranger Company. Essentially using the Rangers as an instrument of segregation, this controversial order guaranteed that X Corps would remain a divided force. General Almond was not shy about his feelings toward African American soldiers, arguing on multiple occasions about their inefficiencies and “un-American” characteristics.³⁴ In addition, Almond’s order further muddied the identity and capabilities of the 2nd Rangers by plugging non-properly trained men into the beleaguered company.

The 2nd Rangers re-entered combat operations in the early spring of 1951, taking part in several operations along U.S. offensives. Completing daring raids behind enemy lines and forming the spearhead of U.S. assaults, the Buffalo Rangers quickly made a name for themselves in American newspapers along with the other Ranger units in the field. Mid-February saw the Rangers make front page news for a reported “Banzai Charge,” in which the men sprinted through a small town raking enemy positions with automatic fire. Like the rest of the Korean Ranger units, the 2nd developed and cherished their very own war cry in battle. Screaming “Buffalo” as they charged, the 2nd Rangers carved out an identity of their very own heritage.³⁵ As March came to a close, the 2nd Rangers took part in the only airborne operation for any of the airborne-qualified Ranger units. Operation Tomahawk saw some 3,500 Americans dropped behind the front lines as a blocking force to catch retreating Chinese soldiers. After successfully making the jump, the 2nd Rangers assisted in a swift American advance up the Korean peninsula.³⁶

The summer of 1951 saw the Korean War sliding into stalemate as the United Nations and Chinese forces settled into more stable positions along the 38th parallel. The war entered into a new phase that lacked the instability and wild territorial changes

³⁴ Morris MacGregor. *Integration of the Armed Forces: 1940-1964* (Washington, D.C.: 2001), 135.

³⁵ Lindsay Parrott, “Red Bulge Broken by Allies in Korea; Chuchon Captured,” *New York Times*, February 21, 1951.

³⁶ The 2nd Rangers received heavy praise for their actions in Operation Tomahawk and the following days, as they assisted the Army advance more than 20 miles in a few short days. Thomas Taylor, *Rangers Lead the Way* (Nashville, TN: Turner Publishing Company, 1996), 110 – 115.

of the first ten months of combat. This shift in warfare dictated a change in tactics and strategy for the American forces in Korea. One of these shifts saw the Army deactivate all of its Ranger companies, principally for manpower needs and lack of perceived success in the field. The men from these units split up and made their way as replacements into standard line infantry units. As the 2nd Ranger Company was deactivated, it received numerous accolades and moments of recognition. Included was a detailed account of the unit's actions from the 7th Infantry Division's commanding officer Major General Claude Ferenbaugh and one of his Korean Army counterparts. Both letters highlight the difficulties of the units' campaign: the frequency of combat and loss, coupled with the complexity of the Rangers' identity. Both letters commend the officers and enlisted men of the 2nd Rangers as "highly professional and disciplined," remarking on the quality of men making up the force.³⁷

CONCLUSION

By the mid-1950s the U.S. military achieved full integration, completing a process that in earnest had started nearly a century beforehand. Race dynamics continued as an issue during America's next conflict in Vietnam, where incidents of racial discrimination and violence regularly occurred. Events like the 1968 Long Binh Jail riot and the 1972 riot aboard the *U.S.S. Kitty Hawk* demonstrate the wide range of racial incidents occurring in Vietnam.³⁸ The integrated military occupied a large voice in the realms of the Civil Rights and Anti-War movements of the 1960s, when both White and Black veterans and civilians came together to protest an unpopular war. Overall, the experience of African Americans in the U.S. military serves as a marker of both progress

³⁷ "Letter of Appreciation," Maj Gen Ferenbaugh, Headquarters 7th Inf. Division. 30 July 1951; "Letter of Appreciation to Sgt. Earl Johnson," Big General Chang Do Young, Headquarters 7th Inf. Division, 28 July 1951. "Ranger History—314.7" *NARA*.

³⁸ For a broader look into the racial issues of the Vietnam War, see Gerald Goodwin, "Black and White in Vietnam" *New York Times*, July 18, 2017; Wallace Terry, *Bloods: Black Veterans of the Vietnam War: An Oral History* (New York: Presidio/Ballantine Books, 1984); Frank McGee, *Same Mud, Same Blood*. (New York: NBC-Universal Media, LLC., 1967).

and frustration. As the U.S. military evolved, so did race dynamics of institutions like the Army, Navy, and Marines. Even as the military attempted to integrate prior to society at large in 1948, it encountered resistance and continuing discrimination. From the USCT of the American Civil War to the 2nd Rangers of Korea, the military position on race has always reflected larger societal trends ongoing in the United States and therefore serves as a key element of the African American experience.

Discussion Questions

1. How does each historical period and conflicts reflect the context of their era?
2. How does the impact of the Cold War affect American military race dynamics?
3. What kind of role can a nation's military play in social movements like the African American Civil Rights movement?

Writing Prompt

In comparing civilian and military segregation, which influences which? Is the military influenced by societal movements or vice versa?