

BLACK HISTORY

The Portland Observer

Black Americans in the Military, part I

AN ARMY NEWS RELEASE

I'm delighted for this opportunity to speak to you about black Americans in the military. There is a wonderful story to be told -- a success story that is very much a part of black history and American history.

In February, we celebrate the history of black Americans. Also in this month, we honor two great patriots who each served as President of our nation -- George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. We never stop to consider that these two patriots were white men. There's no need to. Their race -- the color of their skin -- simply has no bearing on their greatness. We admire Washington and Lincoln not as great white men but as great Americans.

In an ideal world, we could view likewise the achievements of black Americans. In such a world, we would notice only the achievements themselves, not the skin color of those who make them. But the perceptions of too many Americans, black and white, have been distorted by racial stereotypes that began centuries ago in America's Colonial days. Special efforts still are needed to correct the distortion, wipe the fog from our windshields. It helps to learn about the achievements of our great black Americans, past and present. The U.S. Military provides a wealth of success stories. I suggest to you that Black History Month is an ideal time to learn more about black Americans who have risen to prominence in military service to America. To succeed, they not only had to excel in performance; they also had to overcome the resistance of a society that, until this generation, opposed their efforts to serve in any but the most menial jobs.

Consider these words of retired Army Major General Jerry R. Curry, a black American who, in the early

1980s, commanded the U.S. Army Military District of Washington: "Looking over my life and career, it becomes clear that any minority willing to work hard, and play the game that has to be played in any bureaucracy, can become successful. Maybe not as quick, but the opportunities are there... if you're willing to pay the price. There is a price. It may not seem fair, and you may not get the same break as everybody else. But you can make a break for yourself, and you can succeed." Let's go back a few decades. In the early 20th century, one man saw the need -- and took on the mission -- of teaching black Americans about their history. He is known today as the Father of Black History, and his name is Doctor Carter Godwin Woodson. I'm sure that some of you have never heard his name, for he is less well known than many other leaders who came before and after him. But his role was crucial in fostering the self-respect of all black Americans. He had much to say about black American in the military. Listen to his words:

"We should not learn less of George Washington, who was 'First in War, First in Peace, First in the Hearts of His Countrymen.' But we should learn something of the 3,000 Negro soldiers of the American Revolution who helped to make this 'Father of Our Country' possible.

"We should not fail to appreciate the unusual contributions of Thomas Jefferson to freedom and democracy. But we should invite attention also to one of his outstanding contemporaries, Benjamin Banneker, the mathematician and astronomer.

"We should in no way detract from the fame of Perry on Lake Erie or Jackson at New Orleans in the second struggle with England, but we should remember the black men who assisted

in winning these victories on land and sea.

"We should not cease to pay tribute to Abraham Lincoln as the 'Savior of Our Country,' but we should ascribe praise also to the [nearly 180,000 Negroes] who had to be mustered into the service of the Union before it could be preserved, and who by their heroism demonstrated that they were entitled to freedom and citizenship."

Woodson wrote those words within a few years after World War I. He was a visionary. He devoted his life to the cause of equal opportunity for every American. He was not popular, which is one reason you may not know of him. He was a man ahead of his time. But if he were alive today, he would be immensely popular. His viewpoint and his outspoken style were far more compatible with the climate of America today than of his own time.

You probably won't be surprised to learn that he made enemies. What may surprise you is that his enemies included many black Americans. A fiery crusader, he had no use for those among his own race who would settle for compromise or merely maintaining the status quo. He could not tolerate the intolerance of a society that believed black Americans incapable of high achievement, let alone greatness.

Yes, Woodson often was at odds with his time. Born to former slaves in Virginia on December 19, 1875, he did not enter school until he was 20 years old. To help his parents and his eight brothers and sisters survive, he had worked in the coal mines of West Virginia. But once he entered school, his brilliance shone. Woodson earned a bachelor's degree and advanced degrees from the University of Chicago, then a Ph.D. from Harvard. He was fluent in both Spanish and French.

Woodson was angered by the

gro History. The historian Arthur Schlesinger said Woodson "enlisted the interest and talents of historians of both races and maintained exacting standards of research and presentations which made the journal rank among the best academic periodicals in the country."

Woodson's passion was to develop a sense of self-worth within the black community. His strategy was to teach all black Americans about their racial roots, their history.

Much of the anger Woodson felt can be explained by the institutional prejudice he saw against black men in military service. In World War I, more than 400,000 black Americans served in the armed forces -- in segregated units. They were considered mentally unable and morally unfit to serve on the front lines.

The myth of their unsuitability for combat was shattered by the 369th Infantry Regiment, an all-black unit. After supporting the French army for 191 days on the front lines, that regiment received the French Croix de Guerre for bravery in combat. That is black history. That is American history. Black nurses also served with distinction in the war, especially during the devastating flu epidemic of 1918, which killed millions. Working side by side with their white colleagues, they treated patients regardless of race. One historian wrote that "although these nurses were required to live in segregated quarters, the strength and dignity of the black women prevailed, and they served their country and practiced their profession with great skill and distinction." That is black history. That is American history.

Instead of returning home from the Great War as heroes, black veterans found their prospects in America had not improved. What's more, those on active duty had been reduced in post-

war cutbacks from 400,000 to 11,000, less than 3 percent of their wartime numbers. By contrast, the military as a whole was reduced to about 13 percent of wartime strength. Army officials believed black Americans would make poor soldiers, in spite of their brave performance in combat. Of this discrimination, Woodson

wrote the following words: "For a time, the Negroes were shown a great deference while being used as means to an end. The Negro mistook this for a permanent attitude, and when deflation followed inflation, his sorrows multiplied as fast as his joy had during the World War."

Continued next week.

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