

BLACK HISTORY

The Portland Observer

Black Americans in the Military, part II

AN ARMY NEWS RELEASE

Continued from last week's Black History edition.

As World War II approached, President Roosevelt realized that not only white Americans must be mobilized; black Americans must be mobilized as well. The Selective Service Act of 1940 stated that "in the selection and training of men under this act and in the interpretation and execution of this act, there shall be no discrimination against any person on account of race." It also stated that black soldiers would not be segregated or kept out of combat units. Shortly before the end of the war, Woodson told how the words of society contradicted the actions of society. Here is what he wrote: "When they read in one column of the newspaper that the first soldier to fall in the defense of the Philippines was a Negro and in the next that an innocent suspect was lynched by a mob in Sikeston, Missouri, men of sound mind began to reflect.

"When they see that a Negro came to the rescue and saved from drowning most of the crew on a sinking ship in the icy waters of Alaska and died from pneumonia as a result of that exposure, men begin to think that the Jim Crow is not the proper reward for that hero.

"When one sees reported the Negro woman who died at the front to relieve the suffering soldiers, and learns at the same time that a Negro Wac has been imprisoned and held for the grand jury in Mississippi for riding in the coach with her white Wac companion, he must wonder what we are fighting for..."

Of the one million black Americans in uniform during World War II, perhaps those who fought with most distinction were the airmen of the experimental Tuskegee Training Program, which trained Negroes to become aviators. Skeptics of the program believed Negroes incapable of mastering the complex technology and skills of aviation. But their skepticism was shown to be without basis. Many combat aircraft of the German air force -- the Luftwaffe -- would fall in flames from the skies of Europe, shot down by the Tuskegee pilots.

Commanded by General Benjamin O. Davis Jr., the 332nd Fighter Group received, for gallantry in combat, a Distinguished Unit citation from the President of the United States. His fighter group sank a destroyer of the German Navy, a feat never before accomplished by fighter pilots alone. Another Tuskegee unit, the 99th Fighter Squadron, received three Distinguished Unit Citations. That squadron was credited with destroying five enemy aircraft in less than four minutes, another feat without precedent.

Perhaps the most famous of all pilots in the Tuskegee program was Daniel "Chappie" James. The youngest of 17 children, James was a combat veteran of World War II, Korea and Vietnam. James flew 78 combat missions into North Vietnam and led a flight in which seven Soviet MIG 21s were destroyed, the highest kill of any mission during the Vietnam War. At the end of his military career, James received his fourth star, becoming a full general. He became widely known for his speeches on Americanism and patriotism, which won for him praise and acclaim throughout the world. That is black history. That is American history.

Although many black Americans fought with distinction in World War II, they returned home to a segregated American society and a segregated American military. Most black soldiers at that time could not meet the tough educational requirements to reenlist, much less to become commissioned officers. The Army brass had a tough time explaining that only 48 officers were black in a Regular Army compliment of over 20,000 black soldiers. Unfortunately that, also, is black history. That, also, is American history.

Meanwhile, pressure grew stronger from the black community to racially integrate the armed forces. In 1948, President Harry S. Truman issued Executive Order 9981, which called for equal opportunity and equal treatment for all members of the armed forces. But the Army opposed this order on the grounds that it would erode unit cohesion during a time of preparation for war.

President Truman called a special congressional committee to study how the devices would implement the order. Testifying before this committee, Colonel Harold Riegelman summed up the problem of racial prejudice succinctly. Here's what he said: "The pressure for immediate action against segregation in the armed forces is made even greater by the unparalleled position of leadership the United States holds today in international affairs. The United States is looked upon as the greatest champion of freedom and democracy in the world, where the dark people outnumber the white, where the concept of racial superiority and white supremacy is an insult to more than half of the earth's population.

Shortly before his death in 1950, Woodson echoed Colonel Riegelman's words. As if in prophecy, he warned America that tolerance of racism and segregation soon would end: "the colored peoples," he said, "constituting the majority of the population of the universe, will eventually find the means to make themselves felt in international circles, where the destinies of nations will be eventually determined."

Doctor Carter Godwin Woodson died in Washington D.C., on April 3, 1950. History bore out his prophecy that segregation soon would end in the United States. We may take pride, however, that he was mistaken in his belief that change would occur only as the result of pressure applied in "international circles." Of course, he could not know how, or to what extent, America would change in the turbulent decade of the sixties, as the civil rights movement gained momentum. America would suffer great pain to achieve progress in civil rights for this black American citizens. But progress she would achieve, and she would achieve it by the brave efforts of many Americans. She would achieve it not only by the efforts of civil rights activists but also of a new generation of government officials -- leaders who realized that America must change, must give equal opportunity to all Americans. And ultimately she would achieve it through the fairness, de-

centy, and common sense of the great majority of American people.

How fortunate we are -- we who serve our great country of America. We may be Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, Airmen or Coast Guardsmen. We may be civilians in federal service. However we serve, we know that today we are judged not by the color of our skin but by the quality of our accomplishment and the content of our character.

Department of Defense figures show that black Americans comprise about 20 percent of the military force -- higher than their proportion of the overall U.S. population, which is about 12.4 percent.

What is more significant, these black Americans do not serve only in the junior enlisted ranks. More and more, they serve as noncommissioned officers, warrant officers and commissioned officers. As of 1995 in the Army, the largest of the military services, more than 11 percent of commissioned officers were black. Of warrant officers, nearly 11 percent were black. Of sergeants major, the Army's top enlisted soldiers, nearly 28 percent were black. Of the 323 general officers in the Army in December 1994, 26 were black -- 8 percent of the Army's general officer corps.

Is opportunity truly equal in every military service and every unit of the armed forces? In spite of spectacular progress over recent decades, few would be so bold as to claim that it is. But the simple statistics of rank and race bear out that with each passing year, opportunity does steadily become more nearly equal. We have every reason to believe it will continue to do so. More than ever before, black Americans -- like Americans of every other race -- are moving up in their military careers as fast and as high as their peers -- all their peers,

not just the peers of their own race. And, of course, as they rise in rank and responsibility, they lead persons of every race, who are integrated throughout the military services of the United States of America.

There is one black American today whose recent military service is known and respected throughout this nation and the world -- General Colin Powell.

Perhaps, some day, when we are confident that we have charted and channeled the danger waters of race prejudice, we won't rely on it so much.

On that day, society will view black history no longer as a separate book but as an important theme that weaves through all American history. On that day, society will view the achievements of black Americans as we view the achievements of other Americans -- person by person.

We Americans are proud of our diversity; we celebrate and honor our unique traditions, our special heritages, whatever they may be. But regardless of our roots, we remain -- first, last and always -- Americans.

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Haitian Dance and lecture

Portland State University's World Dance Office again offers a rare opportunity for the community to explore another culture through its dance and rhythms.

Native Jamaican Yanique Hume will give a free public lecture on Afro-Caribbean dance Thursday, February 27, at 7 p.m. in PSU's Multicultural Center, Room 126 Smith Center, 1825 SW Broadway.

Hume also will present a Haitian Dance Workshop, entitled "Rara," Friday through Sunday, February 28 - March 2, in Room 207 of the Health & Physical Education Building, 930 SW Hall. The workshop takes place Friday and Saturday 4-6 p.m. and Sunday 4:30-6:30 p.m. Cost is \$8 per class for the general public; \$6 per class for PSU faculty/staff and non PSU-students with valid I.D. It is free to PSU students with I.D.

A highly trained percussion ensemble will accompany each class. Drummer Dehran Duckworth has worked with dancers and drummers in California, Hawaii, New England, Europe and Africa. He specializes in Haitian and Cuban rhythms. Women attending the workshop should wear a long, full skirt.

Yanique Hume has been trained in and taught Afro-Caribbean dance for nearly 20 years. She studied with renowned teachers in New York; Kingston, Jamaica; and Havana, Cuba. She is a member of the acclaimed L'Acadco Dance Company in Kingston.

She was a member of Panache, a steeldrum and dance ensemble in Jamaica and in Kwanzaa, a women's percussive ensemble in Burlington, Vermont.

From 1984 to 1986 Hume was a member of the Alvin Ailey Repertory Ensemble in New York. She has toured extensively, in the Caribbean, Mexico, the U.S., the United



Yanique Hume

Kingdom and has been profiled in several international music videos and magazines.

She has taught in Jamaica and the U.S. Currently, Hume is working toward her bachelor of arts degree in comparative religion, with a minor in anthropology, at University of Vermont.

She received a diploma in dance theatre and production from Edna Manley College of the Visual and Performing Arts in Kingston, Jamaica. She has done extensive research in Haitian Vodoun, Caribbean folk culture including ritual and secular dances, Orisha tradition in the New World, the Wake Complex dances of Jamaica, and ritual theatre.

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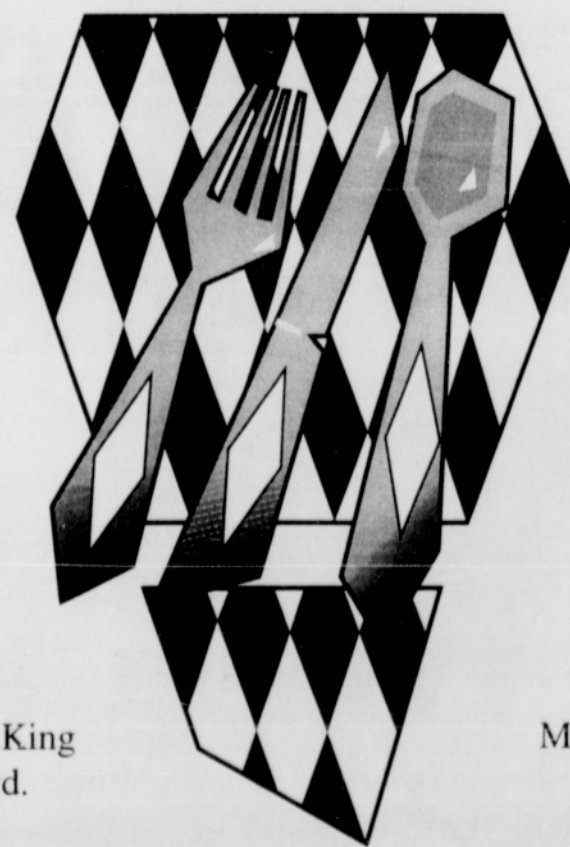
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