

African American Military Veterans

The history of African Americans who served in the US military is largely unknown. After some research, here is what I found, going back to the Civil War. Early in the Civil War, the Union was reluctant to let black soldiers fight because of concern over white soldier's willingness to accept black soldiers and the respect the black soldiers would feel entitled to when the war ended. I noticed that this was a fear during most of our wars. Some whites believed that black Veterans would get used to being treated the same as whites while in the military and they would expect the same when discharged and back in their communities. Another fear was that the black Veterans would have learned how to use guns. Nearly 200,000 black men enlisted in the Union forces during the Civil War.

When WWI started, black writers and leaders debated the merits of signing to fight for a country that denied them full citizenship. However, 380,000 black men enlisted hoping their service would increase their standing when they returned home. It didn't work and one of the reasons given was that black soldiers had enjoyed wartime liaisons with white French women and would be expecting sex with white women when they returned home. Several black soldiers were attacked for wearing their uniforms; some were lynched.

During WWII, 1.2 million black men enlisted in the military. Initially these men were barred from combat but served in service duties. As the death toll rose among combat soldiers, blacks were moved into combat roles. It should be noted that black soldiers stationed at military bases in the segregated South were forbidden from eating in restaurants that opened their doors to German POWs. Even the GI Bill that started at the end of WWII caused problems for black Veterans. Educational benefits could not be used because blacks were not allowed at many Southern colleges. Home ownership under the GI Bill was not available because many communities would not allow blacks to live in their community. Banks also refused to give loans to blacks even when backed by the VA. In New York and northern New Jersey suburbs, less than 100 of the 67,000 mortgages insured by the GI Bill supported purchases by non-whites. Progress was made, however, following WWII. President Truman issued an executive order 9981 Desegregation of the Armed Forces. The last of the all-black units was abolished in September 1954.

Following civil rights legislation of the 1950s and 60s, Vietnam was the first war with an integrated military. From stories I've read and oral histories I've listened to, it appears that blacks and whites did serve well together. In an interview with People magazine, Wallace Terry, a black journalist said about Martin Luther King "In his famous 1963 speech at the Lincoln Memorial he said he had a dream that one day the sons of former slaves and sons of slave owners would sit at the same table. That dream came true in only one place, the front lines of Vietnam."