

Martin Luther King Day

Several years ago, I was contacted by two senior administrators at Moorhead School District and asked if I would be a presenter for their Martin Luther King day event. Of course, I asked the obvious question, why do you want an old white guy to present? Their answer was that since I'd been involved with collections of WWII Veterans stories, I could give a presentation on that project. After doing some thinking and research, I agreed to present. My topic was Contributions of Minority Servicemembers During WWII. I found the Veterans History Project on the Library of Congress website – www.loc.gov/vets and used portions of many of their recorded stories to develop my presentation. My audience was a group of teachers who are probably the most difficult audience because they do all the things they do not like their students doing; talking, not paying attention, shuffling papers, etc. I was surprised that they were quiet and listening because of the stories being told by the Veterans. If you go back to my article from January 2017, you can learn more about those servicemembers at bakkeconsulting.com and click on Veterans Corner Column. MLK day also gave me the idea to research Arlington National Cemetery and on the official website, I found some very interesting information. The first military burial at Arlington was 13 May 1864. More than 400,000 people have been buried on the 624 acres across the Potomac River from Washington, D.C.

Over 16,000 Civil War soldiers are buried at Arlington. Among those are approximately 1,500 United States Colored Troops, the official designation given to all African Americans units serving the in the US Army during the Civil War. Three of USCT were Medal of Honor recipients. Of the 163 sailors from the USS Maine were 22 African American sailors who went down with the ship. During World War I over 400,000 African Americans served in uniform with approximately 40,000 serving in combat units. The highest ranking black officer during WWI was Colonel Charles Young, a West Point graduate. World War II saw over 2.5 million African Americans serving with the vast majority in the Army. By September 1944, 8.7 percent of the Army was black. The segregated 761st Tank Battalion fought for 183 continuous days in more than 30 major assaults in the European Theater of Operations. The Tuskegee Airmen served with honor during the war. In October 1940 Benjamin Davis became the first African American general and served 50 years in the Army. All of this occurred while the US military was segregated. Korean War African American “Chappie” James began his training at Tuskegee University near the end of WWII and flew 101 combat missions in Korea and became the first African American to be promoted to four-star general. Perhaps the most interesting is the story of James Parks, the only person buried at Arlington who was also born there. He was born a slave on the Arlington estate of George Washington Park Custis. He worked for the Army from 1862 – 1929 as maintenance man and gravedigger.