



African Americans and the Military

Curriculum Unit 02.03.07
by Burt Saxon

i. Academic Setting

My Advanced Placement United States History class at Hillhouse High School is almost exclusively African-American. These students are primarily eleventh graders taking their first Advanced Placement course. The full-year course begins with the Reconstruction period, proceeds to the present, and then reviews United States History from the colonization period until the Civil War. The main text is *The American Pageant* by Bailey, Kennedy, and Cohen. Ancillary reading includes Bailey and Kennedy's two-volume *The American Spirit*.

ii. Strategies

My students have shown great interest in both social history and African-American history. Discussions of United States foreign policy have proven less successful, although the events of September 11, 2001 did increase interest in the history of United States foreign policy. Last summer Professor Harry Williams, chairman of the History Department at Carleton College (my alma mater), suggested that an examination of the African-American experience in the military might interest my students. I believe he is correct.

This unit could be taught as a "stand alone" unit in an Advanced Placement course organized thematically. In a chronologically-organized course like mine, the lesson plans could be used as supplementary material for several historical periods. The unit begins with a historical essay which describes, analyzes, compares, and evaluates my sources. This essay should be suitable reading for Advanced Placement students. I will then provide ten one-page handouts describing key periods and key figures in African-American military history.

iii. Objectives

I hope to pose and answer six questions in African-American military history:

1. How does African-American military history reflect both discrimination and the often heroic struggle to overcome discrimination?
2. Has the military been ahead or behind the rest of society as far as equal opportunity is concerned?
3. How accurate is the scholarship in this field?
4. What were the key periods of progress in African-American military history?
5. Who were the key figures in African-American military history?
6. What role did whites, particularly United States Presidents, play in African-American military history?

My plan is to begin with a brief discussion of my sources for this unit. A historical essay which addresses the first four questions will follow. The unit will answer the last two questions with ten one-page handouts titled as follows:

African-Americans and the Military: The Revolutionary War

African-Americans and the Military: The Civil War

African-Americans and the Military: World War One

African-Americans and the Military: World War Two

African-Americans and the Military: Vietnam and the Post-Vietnam Period

African-American Military Heroes: Clifford Alexander and Colin Powell

African-Americans and the Military: The Case of Henry Flipper

African-Americans and the Military: The 1906 Brownsville Riot and the 1917 Houston Shoot-out

African-American Military Heroes: Benjamin Davis, Sr., Benjamin Davis, Jr., and the Tuskegee Airmen

African-Americans and the Military: The Role of White Supporters

iv. Sources

This unit will rely on four main sources. The first is Gerald Astor's *The Right to **Fight: A History of African Americans in the Military*** (Cambridge, MA: DeCapo Press, 1998). Astor is a military historian with six other books to his credit. *The Right to Fight* is a well-written scholarly work of 529 pages. Obviously there is considerable historical information in this book. It will be my main source.

Lt. Col. (Ret.) Michael Lee Lanning published *The African-American Soldier: From **Crispus Attucks to Colin Powell*** in 1997 (Secaucus, NJ: Carol Publishing). This 303 page book is his tenth. Lanning and Astor have at least three things in common. First, their books are their first to deal primarily with African Americans. Second, they are both very good writers. Finally, there are no major differences in interpretations between Astor and Lanning. They both deal with the discrimination theme and the struggle against discrimination. Both stress African-American heroism under fire. Neither pays much attention to the wider historical events of the time periods they discuss.

Burke Davis' *Black Heroes of the American Revolution* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976) was written for the young reader. It is an 82 page book with no footnotes and some questionable information.

Last but far from least is Alan Gropman's essay review "African-American Military History: We Can Do Better" in the Winter, 2002 issue of *Armed **Forces and Society*** . The essay's thesis is self-explanatory. Gropman raises two key questions. The first is, "Do recent scholarly works on African American military history meet high standards of academic scholarship? The second question is, "What are the methodological problems faced by researchers in this field?" Gropman deserves praise for raising these important questions. However, I maintain he answers the first question incorrectly.

V. Issues in African American Military History

African American Military History is a relatively new sub-field of both African American History and of Military History. Michael Lee Lanning's *The African-American Soldier* was written in 1997 and Gerald Astor's *The Right to Fight* was written in 1998. Several other books have been written since.

There are several questions raised by the study of African American Military History. First and foremost is, "How does African-American Military History reflect both discrimination and the often heroic struggle to overcome discrimination?" Gerald Astor implicitly acknowledges the importance of this question by the title of his seminal work in this field. The right to fight is clearly a mixed blessing. While most humans are willing to give their own lives for their countries under certain circumstances, we should note that the life instinct in humans is almost always stronger than the death instinct. In other words, it might even seem that being deprived of the right to die may not be nearly as bad as other forms of discrimination. Yet African Americans historically have wanted inclusion in the military as well as in all other walks of life.

African Americans were deprived of the right to fight - especially before the Civil War. Once that right was granted, African-Americans were confined to segregated units until after World War Two. African-Americans were given some of the most dangerous assignments -especially in unpopular wars. Nor have promotions

within the military been easily forthcoming - even though there have been major improvements here since the late 1960's. Finally, African-Americans have systemically been denied recognition for valor and courage.

Yet as Michael Lee Lanning observes in *The African-American Soldier*, African-American heroism under fire is everywhere to be seen. His subtitle "From Crispus Attucks to Colin Powell" is most appropriate. The names and stories of these African American heroes are just starting to be mentioned.

The second question is, "Has the military been ahead or behind the rest of society as far as equal opportunity is concerned?" The easy answer is that, despite all the discrimination African-Americans have experienced in the military, the military remains the most progressive institution in America. General Colin Powell has maintained "the military has given African-Americans more equal opportunity than any other institution in American society" (Lanning 285). He may well be right, but my observations above imply that the military should be the most racially progressive institution in any society - given that the right to die is a mixed blessing. The other supposedly progressive institution in America in regard to race is the entertainment industry. Once again, one could expect this - since entertainment performed by black Americans has always been largely for the benefit of White Americans. Thus I am not disputing that the military, like the entertainment industry, is ahead of the rest of society. I am merely arguing that one could logically expect these two institutions to be ahead of the curve.

A third question, raised by Alan Gropman in his essay review "African-American Military History: We Can Do Better," is "How accurate is the scholarship in this field?" Gropman maintains the scholarship so far is sloppy, even slipshod. He is very critical of Lynn Homan and Thomas Reilly's *Black Knights: The Story of the Tuskegee Airmen* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Press, 2001). I must admit that identifying Thurgood Marshall as Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court is a fairly major error. (Gropman 334) Errors like this suggest that the appalling lack of respect given African-Americans by historians for so long may have- in some cases- been replaced by an exaggeration of African American achievements.

The case of Peter Salem, an African American Revolutionary War figure, may be instructive here. In 1976 Burke Davis clearly states that Salem "took aim at Major Pitcairn as he was rallying the ... British troops, & shot him thro the head...." The major fell dead just as he was shouting to his men, "The day is ours." (Davis 15). Davis provides no footnotes at all in his book, though he does include a bibliography. Lanning maintains "Salem's accomplishments at Bunker Hill lack official substantiation." (Lanning 9) Astor fails to mention Peter Salem at all. I believe Lanning's treatment of Peter Salem is far preferable to either Davis' or Astor's.

It would seem as if this dispute and others like it are case studies for an essay discussing the biases of professional historians. But the issue here is actually one of methodology rather than bias. Documentation of bravery under fire depends on oral accounts more than other branches of history does. These oral accounts can be extremely difficult to substantiate, making the military historians' craft an especially difficult one.

Gropman is correct, however, in maintaining that African-American military histories must meet the standard of scholarly accuracy. He is somewhat critical of the other two books he reviews: Gail Buckley's *American Patriots: The Story of Blacks in the Military from the Revolution to Desert Storm* (New York: Random House, 2001) and Robert Edgerton's *Hidden Heroes: Black Soldiers in America's Wars* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001). My problem with Gropman is that he claims "there is not much quality to choose from" (Gropman 33) without even mentioning Astor or Lanning.

A final question for discussion is, "What were the key periods of progress in African-American military history?" I strongly believe that African-American history in general can be characterized by what I call the

stock market theory: there have been many peaks and valleys but the long-term trend toward equality is upward. This theory applies to African-American military history. Here I would say the peaks are represented by the Revolutionary War period, the Civil War period, World War II, and the period from Vietnam to the present. The Revolutionary War period marked the beginning of African-American military involvement, The Civil War period marked the expansion of involvement, World War II is significant for desegregation, and the post-Vietnam era is important for progress toward equal opportunity in access to leadership positions.

VI. Lesson Plans

The ten lesson plans that follow are prepared for those teachers who are looking for the proverbial staple of curriculum: the one-page handout. Download the ones you want and take them to the school copier - assuming it is present and operative.

African-Americans and the Military: The Revolutionary War

Black Americans have participated in every armed conflict in American history. Before the twentieth century, the pattern was that the government of the United States would not call on black Americans until defeat was near. Thus black Americans have often been the reinforcements called in at the last minute to save the day. Black Americans have often been given the most dangerous military assignments and they have systemically been denied recognition for their efforts and heroism.

The Revolutionary War represents a slight variation of this pattern. There was no organized central government, so black involvement varied considerably from state to state. The most intense involvement was in Massachusetts. The first American to die in the struggle for independence was **Crispus Attucks**, a black man who died in the Boston Massacre on March 5, 1770, five years before the Revolutionary War began. (Davis 26)

Crispus Attucks is the best known of the black soldiers who fought for American independence. But there were many others. Historian Burke Davis estimates at least five thousand black Americans fought for independence. (Davis 1) Who were these men? Let us briefly sum up Davis' profiles of some of these men (in alphabetical order):

Davis calls **James Armistead** the most important American spy during the Revolutionary War. Armistead volunteered to help the British, but sent reports back to the patriots every day. The British never suspected the young black man. **Oliver Cromwell** of New Jersey fought at Valley Forge and Brandywine and was present for the British surrender at Yorktown. **Austin Dabney**, a slave on a Georgia plantation, took the place of his master and became an important artillery man. **James Forten**, far better known as a prominent abolitionist, fought in the Revolution at age fifteen. **Lemuel Haynes**, who later became a prominent minister, helped Ethan Allen of Vermont storm the British at Fort Ticonderoga. A portrait of the soldier **Agrippa Hull** still hangs in the historical room of the Stockbridge, Massachusetts town library. **George Lathcom** demonstrated heroism in battle in Virginia and was set free by Colonel John Cropper. **Lambert Latham** died

in battle after killing a British commander. A plaque in Fort Griswold later listed Latham, whose nickname was Lambo, as Sambo. **William Lee** was George Washington's chief aide and closest companion. **Salem Poor** demonstrated such great bravery at Bunker Hill that fourteen white officers recommended him for a Congressional reward. But none was forthcoming. **Joseph Ranger** served in the Virginia navy for nine years and became a prominent Portsmouth businessman after the War's conclusion.

Finally there is **Peter Salem**. Davis and some other historians credit Salem with killing British Major Pitcairn. Most historians seem to feel that claim is unsubstantiated, but Salem's participation and courage during the Revolution do not seem in doubt.

Questions for Discussion:

Why did it take so long for Americans in general and historians in particular to recognize African-American heroism during the Revolutionary Period?

What specific problems would be faced by military historians that other historians might not face?

African-Americans and the Military: The Civil War

Hayward Shepherd, a free black railway baggage master, became the first casualty of the Civil War when he was killed by mistake during John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, in October, 1859. (Lanning 30) There would be many other African-American casualties - but not at the beginning of the Civil War. President Lincoln did not call for the abolition of slavery, nor for the enlistment of black soldiers at first (Lanning 35) - probably to keep the border states from seceding. Frederick Douglass, the most eloquent black freeman, stated "The side which first summons the Negro to its aid will conquer." (Lanning 35)

The North heeded Douglass' advice, though not for the best reasons. In 1862 the *Philadelphia North American* declared, "The lives of white men can and ought to be spared by the employment of blacks as soldiers." (Lanning 36)

Shortly after President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts formed two regiments of black volunteers under the leadership of Commander Robert Gould Shaw. These regiments, whose heroics were immortalized in the film *Glory*, became important to the Union war effort. They fought bravely, though in a losing cause, at Fort Wagner, South Carolina, in July, 1863. Twenty-three year old sergeant William H. Carney became the first African-American to receive the Medal of Honor because of his bravery in combat. Many of his comrades and Commander Shaw died at Fort Wagner, but their bravery did not go unnoticed- even by the pro-slavery newspapers. (Lanning 45) One white officer declared, "You have no idea how my prejudices with regard to Negro troops have been dispelled by the battle the other day." (Astor 37)

Racial equality both within and outside the military was still a long way off. The Conscription Act of 1863 allowed those drafted into the Union army to buy an exemption for three hundred dollars. Poor whites in the

North, infuriated by this unfairness, used African-Americans as scapegoats, killing more than a hundred defenseless black civilians in New York City the same week that the Massachusetts 54th assaulted Fort Wagner. (Lanning 48) The Militia Act of 1862 stated specifically that African-American troops would receive less pay than their white counterparts, which sparked work stoppages by individual black soldiers. One of these soldiers, Sgt. William Walker, was tried, convicted, and executed. (Lanning 49-50)

Black women also supported the Union during the Civil War. Abolitionists Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth served as nurses in Northern hospitals. Susie King became a teacher for black soldiers, later publishing her memoirs as Susie King Taylor. (Lanning 59-60)

Questions for Discussion:

In what ways did the Civil War experiences of African-Americans in the military reflect signs of racial progress?

In what ways did the Civil War experiences of African-Americans in the military show what was needed to achieve racial equality both within and outside the military?

African-Americans and the Military: World War One

African-American soldiers had fought bravely for their country during the American Revolution, the War of 1812, the Civil War, and the Spanish American War. But racial equality was still only a dream both inside and outside the military. Thus America's entry into World War I in 1917 sparked a vigorous debate within black communities throughout America. Columbia University law student Randolph Owen and others noted that race prejudice had actually been increasing in America. (Lanning 129) But W.E.B DuBois noted that blacks had been making considerable economic progress and urged, "Let us not hesitate. Let us, while the war lasts, forget our special grievances, close our ranks shoulder to shoulder with our white fellow citizens in the Allied Nations that are fighting for democracy." (Astor 108)

World War I was an unpopular war. Draft boards seemed more than happy to draft nonwhites, even those who were physically unfit, so that whites could stay home. (Astor 109) The draft statutes for World War I specifically called for racial segregation within the military. African-Americans who received their military training in the South ran right into Jim Crow. Major J.F. Floyd of South Carolina spoke for most of his fellow Southerners when he declared, "I am sorry they(the 15th Regiment of the New York National Guard)have been ordered here, for with their northern ideas about racial equality, they will probably expect to be treated like white men. I can say right here they will not be treated as anything except negroes." (Astor 110)

Most black soldiers ended up fighting in France, where they were treated quite well- although the French high command was aware that "white Americans become greatly incensed at any public expression of intimacy between white women and black men." (Astor 115)

The commander of the black 369th regiment, Colonel William Hayward, was loyal to his troops, but critical of General John J. Pershing; "Our great American general simply put the black orphan in a basket, set it on the doorstep of the French, pulled the bell, and went away." (Astor 115) The French provided the "Men of Bronze" French rifles, French helmets, and French rations. (Lanning 138) The French even provided recognition for the men of the 369th. 171 officers and soldiers received the Legion of Merit from the French government.

(Lanning 139)

The heroism of black soldiers did not receive official recognition from the American government until seventy-two years after the conflict. Historical research prompted President George H.W. Bush to award a Medal of Honor to family members of Corporal Freddie Stowers on April 19, 1991. (Lanning 143)

Questions for Discussion: What problems did African-American soldiers face during World War One?

What role can historians play in correcting injustices of the past?

African-Americans and the Military: World War Two

On the eve of World War Two, Charles Hamilton Houston, the Howard Law professor who planned the successful legal campaign to outlaw segregation in schools, called for racial equality within the military. (Lanning 162) He was unaware that the military already had a plan ready. The military proposed to increase the number of black soldiers to equal the percentage of blacks in the population. Furthermore, President Franklin Roosevelt appointed Benjamin O. Davis, Sr. a brigadier general. Roosevelt made William Hastie assistant secretary in the War Department and Major Campbell Johnson a special advisor to the Selective Service System. (Lanning 165) But Roosevelt did not dismantle segregation within the military. The American Red Cross declared in 1941 that it would no longer accept blood donated by blacks because “white men in the service would refuse blood plasma if they knew it came from Negro veins.” Charles Drew, the black American who developed the procedure for extracting blood plasma, resigned from the Red Cross in protest. (Lanning 169)

Like other Americans, blacks fought bravely during World War Two. But unlike other Americans, blacks were not given the opportunity to participate in combat until near the end of the war, when President Roosevelt needed the black vote in the 1944 election. (Lanning 174) General Dwight Eisenhower demanded integrated troops when things were going badly, but discrimination remained strong in promotions and recognition. (Lanning 182) In fact, the seven black Medal of Honor recipients received their medals from President Clinton in 1997; six of these awards were posthumous. (Lanning 187)

The Army was not the only branch of the service with a poor record in race relations. The Air Force also discriminated- despite the existence of the Tuskegee Airmen. The Navy did recognize messman Dorie Miller, who shot down two Japanese planes at Pearl Harbor after rescuing his commanding officer. (Lanning 198) He was given the Navy Cross (the second highest valor award) and promoted to mess attendant first class. Miller died in 1943 after a Japanese torpedo destroyed his ship. (Lanning 199) The Navy did commission thirteen black officers in 1944, but their training was marked by racial harassment. (Astor 223)

On July 26, 1948, three years after the end of World War II, President Harry Truman issued Executive Order 9981, which ended racial segregation in the military. The platform of Thomas Dewey, Truman’s Republican opponent for President that fall, had called for an end to racial segregation in the military just before the order was issued. (Lanning 221)

Questions for discussion:

In what ways did World War Two result in a movement toward racial equality within the military?

What still needed to be accomplished within the military before racial equality would be achieved?

African-Americans and the Military: The Vietnam War

During the Korean War, the integration of the U.S. armed forces demanded by Executive Order 9981 became a harbinger for the integration of U.S. public schools demanded by the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Implementation of desegregation proceeded slowly despite orders to do so.

The Vietnam War was different. It proved to be the most integrated conflict in American History. (Lanning 250) Black soldiers were a major part of this controversial undeclared war. Blacks made up 13.5% of the U.S. population and 10.6% of the forces in the war zone. Yet blacks accounted for 20% of the U.S. casualties. (Lanning 257) One could conclude, as Michael Lanning does, that the military now offered equality of opportunity to a greater degree than the rest of America. (255) But one could also conclude that Vietnam offered more opportunities for black Americans precisely because it was unpopular -like the Civil War and World War One, but unlike World War Two.

It is clear that black Americans fought bravely. On April 24, 1967, General William Westmoreland, commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam, addressed the all-white state legislature in his native state of South Carolina. Westmoreland commented that the black soldier was serving in Vietnam "with distinction equal to his white comrades in arms." (Lanning 252)

Black resistance to military service, despite the highly publicized example of Muhammad Ali, was rare. (Lanning 256) Furthermore there was a slow but consistent increase in the percentage of black military officers. Yet it would be erroneous to state that the military had become a race relations utopia. The assassination of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., exposed racial divisions within the military. Some whites displayed Confederate flags in response to black gatherings in Vietnam to honor King and to protest racism. (Lanning 263-264)

Anecdotal evidence suggests one bright spot. On many occasions white U.S. soldiers risked their lives to save black U.S. soldiers and black U.S. soldiers risked their lives to save white U.S. soldiers. (Astor 429-430, 440)

Black reenlistment rates became double that of whites. (Lanning 263) The role of African-Americans in the U.S. military after Vietnam was starting to become clear. Given the absence of equal opportunity in other American institutions, the military would become one of the few places where a black American could reasonably expect to get a fair shake.

Questions for Discussion:

How did the Vietnam War indicate progress in race relations in America was taking place?

What still needed to be done before the military could say it was free of racial prejudice and discrimination?

African-American Military Heroes: Clifford Alexander and Colin Powell

During and since the 1970's, the military has clearly outpaced most other American institutions in granting African-Americans access to leadership positions. In 1971 Samuel Gravelly became the first black rear admiral in the United States Navy. In 1975 Daniel "Chappie" James became the first black four star general in the Air Force. In 1977 Clifford Alexander, appointed Secretary of the Army by President Jimmy Carter, became the first African-American to head a branch of the military. (Lanning 278)

But by far the best known African-American military leader is Colin Powell. Born in New York City to Jamaican immigrants, Powell was an ROTC student at CCNY in the 1950's. (Astor 414) He became one of the first American advisers in Vietnam in 1962. (Astor 424) After two tours in Vietnam, Powell received a masters degree from George Washington University to help prepare him for an upper-level career in the military. (Astor 486) Like Benjamin Davis, Sr., and Benjamin Davis, Jr., Powell observed racial friction in the military and was often called upon to help resolve it.

In 1978 then Colonel Colin Powell was promoted to Brigadier General. He later became Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff under President Bush. After successfully leading the American military during the Gulf War, Colin Powell - like George Washington, Andrew Jackson, Zachary Taylor, Theodore Roosevelt, and Dwight Eisenhower- became one of the most admired men in America. He is currently Secretary of State, the highest post in the government of the United States ever held by an African-American. Most observers believe he would strengthen a national ticket for either the Republicans or the Democrats.

There is some dispute about whether or not affirmative action played any role in Colin Powell's promotion to Brigadier General. Colin Powell has said that it did and so does former President Bill Clinton. The original promotion list handed Secretary Alexander in 1978 did not contain the names of any Black colonels. Alexander asked the General Officer Board to make sure no ratings had been influenced by prejudice or discrimination. When the list was resubmitted, Powell's name and those of other black colonels were included. Alexander denies that this constituted affirmative action, but historian Gerald Astor sees Powell's promotion as affirmative action in its best form. Alexander did not insist on promoting any black colonels; he simply wanted an inclusive search. This is what affirmative action was meant to accomplish. No stone should be left unturned, no one excluded from consideration if America is to live up to its ideals.

It would be a mistake to see the successes of Colin Powell and other African-American military leaders as proof that racism has disappeared from the military. But it is equally clear that the military has made significant progress toward the goal of racial equality.

Questions for Discussion:

How have other American institutions fared in granting African-Americans access to leadership positions?

Why does Colin Powell have so much respect among Americans?

African-Americans and the Military: The Case of Henry Flipper

The case of Henry Flipper, the first African-American to receive a commission from the U.S. Military Academy, illustrates some of the barriers faced by the African-American military pioneers. Flipper was born in Georgia in

1856. His parents, both slaves, were allowed to wed by their masters. (Astor 48). Flipper attended Atlanta University and upon graduation was nominated for the Military Academy by his congressman. He was the fifth African-American to attend the academy. Like his predecessors, he faced racism from the day he arrived. Flipper described the treatment he received in *A Colored Cadet at West Point* (1878):

The impression made upon me by what I saw while going from the adjutant's office to the barracks was certainly not very encouraging. The rear windows were crowded with cadets watching...with apparently as much astonishment and interest as they would, perhaps, have watched Hannibal cross the Alps. Their words, jeers, etc., were most insulting. (quoted in Astor 48)

Flipper roomed with James Smith, the only other Black cadet at the Academy at that time. But Smith left before graduation. Flipper received applause upon receiving his certificate and wrote, "Even the cadets and other persons connected with the academy congratulated me. Oh how happy I was. I prized the good words of the cadets above all others. They did not hesitate to speak to me or shake hands with me before each other or anyone else. All signs of ostracism were gone." (quoted in Astor 49)

After graduation, Flipper was sent to Kansas to help remove Native Americans from their tribal homelands. Like the other African-American military men on this mission, Flipper was referred to by the Native Americans as a "Buffalo soldier." He was accepted by the white soldiers and officers in Kansas, but later was transferred to Fort Davis in Texas. Here his fellow officers ostracized him, although he did "find some solace in the company of Miss Nell Dryer with whom he enjoyed horseback rides." (Astor 51) This irritated Lt. Charles Nordstrom, a former suitor of Miss Dryer, who was not only lovely, but white. When Major N.B. McLaughlin, described by Flipper as a fine officer and a gentleman, was replaced by Col. William Shafter, Flipper's troubles began.

Flipper was in charge of the commissary and its funds. A discrepancy occurred and Flipper was charged with embezzlement. A court martial eventually cleared Flipper of the embezzlement charge, but he was found guilty of "conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman." (Astor 52) Flipper left the military and for a while could find work only as a clerk for a steam laundry. But he later became an engineer, a surveyor, and an expert on land grants.

Nearly one hundred years after his graduation, a campaign led by a Georgia schoolteacher convinced the Department of the Army to award Henry Flipper an honorable discharge. (Astor 53)

Questions for Discussion:

What types of pressures are faced by those who are among "the first" of their race, gender, or ethnic group to be given an opportunity previously denied?

What lessons can we learn from the case of Henry Flipper?

African-Americans and the Military: The 1906 Brownsville Riot and the 1917 Houston Shoot-out

African-Americans had distinguished themselves in battle both in the Civil War and in the Spanish American War. They were forced to fight in segregated units and their training was also done in segregated facilities. But many towns, particularly in the South, did not want those facilities in their communities. One of the complaining towns was Brownsville, TX. Secretary of War William Howard Taft rejected Brownsville's request to have African-American soldiers of the First Battalion removed from Fort Brown. (Astor 79) Racist whites taunted the soldiers, most businesses refused to serve them, and city parks denied them entry. In August 6, 1906, following two racist incidents, a number of black soldiers -at least nine and as many as twenty - climbed over the walls of Fort Brown and began randomly firing into homes. A mounted police lieutenant confronted the men, who shot and killed his horse. Finally the men went to a saloon which had refused to serve them and shot and killed the barkeep. (Astor 81)

Although no one ever identified any of the men involved, the southwestern Texas commanding officer recommended dismissing all 167 men stationed at the fort. Six Medal of Honor winners were among those recommended for dismissal. Booker T. Washington and other leaders, both black and white, protested, but Taft backed the proposed punishment.. Taft, who later became President, noted that a dismissal was not the same as a dishonorable discharge and that the men could eventually apply for reinstatement. (Astor 83-84) President Theodore Roosevelt also defended the punishment. A number of white officers spoke up on behalf of the men, but to no avail. 14 of the 167 men eventually were reinstated. In 1972 the Nixon administration belatedly granted honorable discharges to all the men of the First Battalion. 86 year old Dorsie Willis, the only survivor, received a belated check for \$25, 000.

An even more serious incident occurred in Houston eleven years later. Members of the 3rd Battalion of the all-black 24th Infantry experienced constant racial harassment. Many of their White officers routinely referred to the black soldiers as "niggers." The men of the 3rd Battalion ended up in a shoot-out with members of the all-White 19th Infantry Regiment sent in to restore order to the base. 16 white soldiers and 4 black soldiers were killed; many others were injured. 23 Black soldiers were eventually executed for this melee. Historian Gerald Astor concludes that the Brownsville and Houston incidents represented a great setback for African-Americans in the military. (106-107)

Questions for Discussion:

What alternatives were available for African-Americans who experienced discrimination within the military at this time in history?

Why is it so difficult to determine exactly what happened at both Brownsville and Houston?

African-American Military Heroes: Benjamin Davis, Sr., Benjamin Davis, Jr., and the Tuskegee Airmen

Benjamin Davis, Sr., and Benjamin Davis, Jr. are clearly the most distinguished father-son tandem in African-American military history. Benjamin Davis, Sr., was born in Washington, DC in 1870. Well-educated at an integrated school, he enlisted in the Spanish-American War in 1898 and became one of three African-American lieutenants in the U.S. army. He served in the Phillipines from 1899-1902. His knowledge of Spanish was quite helpful to him in the Phillipines. In fact, Davis once spoke Spanish to a waiter in Las Vegas, NM who had refused to serve him. The waiter apologized and served Davis. (Astor 79) Davis then taught military science at Wilberforce University in Ohio. (Astor 76-77) Davis quietly fought against segregation and for racial equality from within the military. (Astor 167) He was “a good soldier” rather than a vocal militant like his colleague Lt. Col. Charles Young. During World War Two, Davis served as an ombudsman for black GI’s. On one trip to a base in Tampa, six hundred black GI’s lined up to speak with him. (Astor 174) It seems fair to say that Davis spent a considerable amount of time as a troubleshooter in military race relations. Davis spoke up more loudly against segregation after he retired from the military. His distinguished career helped to ensure more opportunities for future African-American members of the military.

One of the beneficiaries of Davis’ pioneering efforts was his own son Benjamin Davis, Jr. A 1936 graduate of West Point, Benjamin Davis, Jr. wanted to be a pilot. He became the leader of a group called the Tuskegee airmen. The U.S. Army Air Corps had systemically excluded blacks until the Selective Service Act of 1940 outlawed discrimination in selection, induction, and training of military personnel. (Lanning 190)

Although potential black pilots were trained in segregated facilities in Tuskegee, AL - a clear violation of the legislation- the 600 pilots who were trained at Tuskegee performed heroically when finally given the chance to fly in combat. Many died in action. Others had distinguished military careers both during and after World War Two.

Benjamin Davis became commander of the 99th squadron. Later several other black squadrons were placed under his command. He became a Brigadier General in 1959 and later was appointed Chief of Staff in Korea by President Lyndon Johnson. Benjamin Davis, Jr. was more outspoken than his father, but he too was always considered a good soldier by the military establishment. After retiring from the military, Davis began a career in security, first for the city of Cleveland and then for the Federal Aviation Administration. He now lives in Washington, DC. (Astor 514) General Davis was kind enough to send me a signed picture of himself for my classroom at Hillhouse H.S.

Questions for Discussion:

How do the careers of Benjamin Davis, Sr., and Benjamin Davis, Jr. demonstrate that the military became more and more open to African-Americans over time?

What problems might have been faced by Benjamin Davis, Sr., given his role in both the military and the African-American community?

African-Americans and the Military: The Role of White Supporters

Some whites have supported African-American progress in the military. Other whites have tried to prevent progress - while most whites have not cared one way or the other. White officers who commanded African-American troops have tended to be the most supportive of African-Americans within the military. These officers have frequently commended African-American soldiers, sailors, and airmen for their bravery and heroism. There have been other officers whose racist beliefs prevented them from giving African-Americans in the military a fair chance. Fortunately, over time racism within the military has decreased - just as it has decreased in other American institutions.

There have been a few whites who have done more than just praise those under their commands. They have stood up for racial progress. One of these whites was Elmo Zumwalt, Jr., Commander of Naval Operations during the Nixon administration. When Zumwalt was appointed commander in 1970 (for reasons that had nothing to do with race relations), the Navy's track record in race relations was not good. Zumwalt, along with high level officers Horace Robertson, "Chick" Rauch, and Bill Norman was determined to change things. (Astor 446) He started an ambitious race relations sensitization program to help African-American members of the Navy feel more at home. Hair, food, handshakes, and other behavior were now open for discussion. Not surprisingly, many whites resisted Zumwalt's efforts. (Astor 452)

When racial tensions flared up on the USS Constellation and other vessels, Henry Kissinger, Nixon's National Security Adviser, became furious at Zumwalt and so did President Nixon himself. (Astor 460) But Zumwalt stood firm, eventually introducing more than two hundred programs aimed at promoting racial harmony within the Navy. Zumwalt was criticized for not converting senior Naval officials first. Although Bill Norman was black, Zumwalt never consulted on racial matters with Samuel Gravelly, the Navy's first African-American rear admiral. (Astor 460) But today Zumwalt is admired for his courage in confronting the issue of race relations head-on.

Most U.S. Presidents have been extremely cautious regarding African-Americans and the military. Most were quite willing to call on African-Americans to help in conflicts that were either unpopular like Vietnam or difficult to win like the Civil War. But most Presidents made careful political calculations before taking actions which could result in their reelection defeats. Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation and FDR's reluctance to use black combat troops during World War Two are the most powerful examples. The most racially progressive person to occupy the White House was not a President, but rather a First Lady. Eleanor Roosevelt responded to individual African-American soldiers wanting equal treatment (Astor 193), promoted equal opportunity both within the military and the larger society during her husband's Presidency (Astor 225), and suggested that Secretary of War Stimson organize "a little education among our Southern white men and officers." (Astor 245) Michael Lanning even credits her for insisting that African-Americans be given the chance to become pilots. (189)

Questions for Discussion:

Why would it be difficult for whites to advocate racial progress in the military?

Why were U.S. Presidents slow to advocate racial progress in the military?

Conclusions

This research has led me to draw several conclusions about the role of African-Americans in the United States military. The first is that black Americans have fought as bravely, as heroically, and as successfully as white Americans - no more so, no less so. Yet black military achievements deserve special praise because they took place in the face of racism and discrimination. It takes extra devotion to defend a country which has denied you your full rights as a citizen.

Second, it seems that racism within the military closely paralleled racism within the rest of society historically. One has to look closely to see this. The practice of giving black soldiers the most dangerous assignments in unpopular wars is not a sign of racial progress, but rather evidence of racism. So while it would be inaccurate to see the military as an institution more racially biased than other American institutions, it would be equally inaccurate to see the military as a haven of racial tolerance.

Having said that, I would still conclude that the military has moved more quickly toward racial equality than most other American institutions since the end of the Vietnam War. Blacks certainly have more opportunities to become officers than ever before.

Finally, I believe the five year period from 1997 to 2002 will be remembered as the time when scholarship in this area advanced considerably. Military historians Gerald Astor and Michael Lee Lanning deserve most of the credit for telling the important story of the African-American role in the United States military in an inspiring yet scholarly manner.

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Web Sites:

www.africana.com/articles/tt_235.htm. This is a fine encyclopedia entry entitled "Blacks in the American Military" by James Clyde Sellman.

www.fatherryan.org/blackmilitary/ This web site contains superb illustrations.

www.theatlantic.com/politics/defense/moskos.htm. This web site reprints the article "Success Story: Blacks in the Military" by Charles Moskos, which appeared in the May 1986 edition of *The Atlantic*.

Film:

The highly acclaimed 1989 Civil War film *Glory*, starring Matthew Broderick and Denzel Washington, will interest both you and your students. The film is available from most public libraries. Amazon.com carries both VHS and DVD versions.

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