



THE NATIONAL
WWII MUSEUM
NEW ORLEANS

Take a Memo

Understanding African American Soldiers on the Home Front

A Lesson from
the Education Department

The National WWII Museum
945 Magazine Street
New Orleans, LA 70130
(504) 528-1944

www.nationalww2museum.org/learn/education

Take a Memo

Understanding African American Soldiers on the Home Front

Primary sources can be documents, pictures, or artifacts that were produced during a certain time. Instead of merely reading second-hand descriptions (secondary sources) of how African American soldiers felt about discrimination during WWII, a thorough historian will also want to read any official papers from those soldiers. Brigadier General Benjamin O. Davis wrote about those realities in a memo to the War Department in 1943.

OBJECTIVE: By reading General Davis's memorandum to the War Department and answering questions about it, students will learn about the limitations and discrimination endured by black servicemen during WWII. Students will gain an appreciation for researching WWII history using primary documents.

GRADE LEVEL: 7-12

STANDARDS: History Thinking Standard 4—the student interrogates historical data by uncovering the social, political, and economic context in which it was created. Historical Thinking Standard 5—the student identifies issues and problems in the past and analyzes the interests, values, perspectives, and points of view of those involved in the situation.

Content Era 8 (1929-1945) Standard 3C—the student evaluates how minorities organized to gain access to wartime jobs and how they confronted discrimination.

TIME REQUIREMENT: One to two class periods.

DIRECTIONS:

1. Present a brief lesson on the African American experience during WWII. You may find the African Americans in WWII Fact Sheet helpful. It can be read aloud to the class or passed out for them to read on their own.
2. Introduce students to General Benjamin O. Davis as the United States' first African American general. Pass out copies of the General's 1943 memorandum to the War Department for students to read or have students read it out loud. The memo describes the condition of African American soldiers stationed in the South and make recommendations for improvement of those conditions.
3. Pass out worksheet questions for students to complete.
4. Hold a class discussion to explore students' answers.

ASSESSMENT: Components for assessment include the worksheet and the class discussion.

ENRICHMENT: Have students compose memos to the principal of the school relating an issue of importance. These memos can be shared in class, but because students do not work for the principal, they should not be sent. If students want to address the principal on a certain issue, they can do so in another form, such as a petition or a formal letter.

WAR DEPARTMENT
OFFICE OF THE INSPECTOR GENERAL
WASHINGTON

9 November 1943

MEMORANDUM FOR GENERAL PETERSON.

1. During the last two months I have, with Mr. Gibson, the Civilian Aide to the Secretary of War, visited the colored troops at the following stations: Fort Devens, Massachusetts; the New York Port of Embarkation (New York City, Brooklyn, Camp Shanks and Mitchel Field, New York; Camp Kilmer and Fort Dix, New Jersey), Selfridge Field and Oscoda, Michigan. During 1941, 1942, and the early part of this year, my visits were made to the stations located in the southeastern states, Indiana, Kentucky, Missouri, Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, Arizona, and Illinois.
2. I have reviewed inspection reports and investigations made by other inspectors general from this office and the field. I was deeply impressed with the high morale and attitudes of the colored officers and soldiers stationed in the states visited in the past two months. They were so different from those of the colored officers and soldiers at the stations located in the Southern states. While there has been an improvement in general conditions, there is still great dissatisfaction and discouragement on the part of the colored people and the soldiers. They feel that, no matter how much they strive to meet War Department requirements, there is no change in the attitude of the War Department. The colored officers and soldiers feel that they are denied the protection and rewards that ordinarily result from good behavior and proper performance of duty.
3. Colored combat units, upon completion of training, have not been sent to theaters of operations. The enlisted personnel of two battalions of Field Artillery has been recently transferred to service units. The War Department, through Assistant Secretary McCloy, has stated that this was directed by military necessity. Somebody in the Department permitted this situation to develop. The personnel transferred from these Field Artillery units is reduced in morale. The commissioned and enlisted personnel left with the Field Artillery units can only look forward to another period of from 14 to 16 months of preparation. They can hardly hold out much hope for an opportunity for combat.
4. The 93rd Division has about completed the prescribed training. The disposition of this Division in the near future will have a great effect on the morale of the colored people. In the activation of new colored units, few commanding officers, if any, have been selected from the colored field officers. Some of those colored field officers have completed the courses at the service schools and have been serving in their present grades for long periods.
5. The press news items and reports of investigations show that there has been little change in the attitudes of civilian communities in Southern states. The colored man in uniform receives nothing but hostility from community officials. The attitude is still that of the Governors of six Southern states reported by General Cooke as a result of his inspections,

18 May to 20 June 1942. The colored man in uniform is expected by the War Department to develop a high morale in a community that offers him nothing but humiliation and mistreatment. Military training does not develop a spirit of cheerful acceptance of Jim-Crow laws and customs. The War Department has failed to secure for the colored soldier protection against violence on the part of civilian police and to secure justice in the courts in communities near-by to Southern stations. In the areas recently inspected, the colored soldier feels that he can secure justice in the civil courts. He has not been set upon by the civilian police. He has not been denied the privilege of occupying empty seats in public busses, street cars, etc. Taxicabs do serve him. This is not so in Southern communities.

6. On the training fields the development of morale does not take into consideration Jim-Crow laws and customs. The "Four Freedoms" cannot be enjoyed under Jim-Crow influences. Officers of the War Department General Staff have refused to attempt any remedial action to eliminate Jim-Crow. In fact, the Army, by its directives and by actions of commanding officers, has introduced the attitudes of the "Governors of the six Southern states" in many of the other 42 states of the continental United States.
7. I believe the time has come for the War Department to give some consideration to relieving the colored troops now located in the six Southern states referred to by General Cooke. Some consideration should be given to the replacement of white commanding officers by colored officers of proven ability--those who have met War Department requirements for promotion and assignments. Colored officers commanding colored units would go far toward insuring the confidence of the colored citizens in the fairness of the War Department. Unless something is done in the near future, the War Department in coming in for a great deal of criticism by the politicians in next year's political campaign.
8. I have always tried to be wholly impersonal in connection with the performance of my duties. I have at all times received the kindest consideration and cooperation from those with whom I have been associated. I have striven at all times to successfully accomplish the missions assigned to me. I am grateful for the privilege of contributing to the war effort. The Department can justify its failure to give me a promotion. The colored people only know the long time I have been in grade. I believe a promotion coming to me at this time, and a gradual relief of colored troops from Southern stations, and the assignment of colored officers of field grade to the command of colored units would go a long way toward inspiring confidence of colored people in the War Department.
9. May I take this opportunity to say that I am grateful for the consideration and interest you have displayed in my personal comforts and welfare. I feel that it would not be fair to you if I did not keep you informed of the trend of colored opinions. I ask your indulgence for the personal references.

B. O. DAVIS,
Brigadier General,
U.S. Army.

Take a Memo
African American Soldiers on the Home Front
Student Worksheet

Directions: After reading General Benjamin O. Davis's memo to the War Department, answer the following questions. Some answers are found within the text; other answers require you to analyze the text and use your knowledge of the time period. If you use quotes, be sure to put quotation marks around them.

1. What is General Davis's impression of the African American ("colored") officers and soldiers in the north and northeast?

2. What is his impression of the African American officers and soldiers in the southeast?

3. To what does the general ascribe the differences? Use specific examples from the memo.

4. What evidence is there that African American troops want to enter combat against the enemy?

5. What are some overall concerns the general has regarding African American troops, all across the United States?

6. General Davis writes of "Jim-Crow laws and customs." To what is he referring? Look up this term if you do not know.

7. What solutions does the general suggest for increasing the morale and safety of African American troops?

8. What does he suggest for himself?

9. What do you think was the result of the general's memo? Was it effective? How can you find out?

10. Do African Americans and other minorities in positions of power have a responsibility to campaign for minority rights, as the general did in his memo? Why or why not?

AFRICAN AMERICANS IN WORLD WAR II

Fighting for a Double Victory



African Americans served bravely and with distinction in every theater of World War II, while simultaneously struggling for their own civil rights from “the world’s greatest democracy.” Although the United States Armed Forces were officially segregated until 1948, WWII laid the foundation for post-war integration of the military. In 1941 fewer than 4,000 African Americans were serving in the military and only twelve African Americans had become officers. By 1945, more than 1.2 million African Americans would be serving in uniform on the Home Front, in Europe, and the Pacific (including thousands of African American women in the Women’s auxiliaries).

During the war years, the segregation practices of civilian life spilled over into the military. The draft was segregated and more often than not African Americans were passed over by the all-white draft boards. Pressure from the NAACP led President Roosevelt to pledge that African Americans would be enlisted according to their percentage in the population. Although this percentage, 10.6%, was never actually attained in the services during the war, African American numbers grew dramatically in the Army, Navy, Army Air Force, Marine Corps, and the Coast Guard.

While most African Americans serving at the beginning of WWII were assigned to non-combat units and relegated to service duties, such as supply, maintenance, and transportation, their work behind front lines was equally vital to the war effort. Many drove for the famous “Red Ball Express,” which carried a half million tons of supplies to the advancing First and Third Armies through France. By 1945, however, troop losses virtually forced the military to begin placing more African American troops into positions as infantrymen, pilots, tankers, medics, and officers in increasing numbers. In all positions and ranks, they served with as much honor, distinction, and courage as any American soldier did. Still, African American MPs stationed in the South often could not enter restaurants where their German prisoners were being served a meal.

On D-Day, the First Army on Omaha and Utah Beaches included about 1,700 African American troops. This number included a section of the 327th Quartermaster Service Company and the 320th Anti-Aircraft Barrage Balloon Battalion, which protected troops on the beach from aerial attack. Soon the all-black 761st Tank Battalion was fighting its way through France with Patton’s Third Army. They spent 183 days in combat and were credited with capturing 30 major towns in France, Belgium, and Germany.

The Army Air Force also established several African American fighter and bomber groups. The famous “Tuskegee Airmen” of the 332nd Fighter Group became part of the 15th Air Force, flying ground support missions over Anzio and escorting bombers on missions over Southern Italy. The Tuskegee Airmen flew more than 15,000 sorties between May 1943 and June 1945. Bomber crews often requested to be escorted by these “Redtails,” a nickname acquired from the painted tails of Tuskegee fighter planes. Sixty-six Tuskegee Airmen died in combat.

Stephen Ambrose identified the lamentable American irony of WWII, writing, “*The world’s greatest democracy fought the world’s greatest racist with a segregated army*” (Ambrose, *Citizen Soldier*). During the global conflict, African American leaders and organizations established the “Double V” campaign, calling for victory against the enemy overseas and victory against racism at home. This new black consciousness and the defiant rejection of unjustifiable racism planted important seeds for the post-War civil rights movement.

The National WWII Museum honors the contributions of African Americans in World War II.