Concealed Heroism:
The African American in Battle

Rachel Bailey
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Dr. Beverly Gordon
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Introduction

History includes the past events and people that define who we are today. Carter G. Woodson (1933) believes that “The chief value in studying the records of others is to become better acquainted with oneself and with one’s possibilities to live and to do in the present age” (pg. 139). In the classroom, the students are taught the history of America through the eyes of the dominant race. Therefore, the black students miss the opportunity to understand themselves or their race, and many significant people of our pasts go unnoticed. This unit will give students of all color the chance to become acquainted with the numerous African Americans who so boldly took up arms and risked their lives whenever given the opportunity to fight for the country who saw them as inferior. By giving the Negro/African American defenders the recognition they so deserve in our history textbooks, the future of America can be inspired by the courage of these heroic figures in battle.

Unit Overview

The Concealed Heroism Unit will be most adaptable to a high school, United States history class. The focus will be on the involvement of African American men in four of our nations’ major wars from 1775-1945; The American Revolution, The Civil War, World War I, and World War II. The objective for the unit is that the students will be able to identify the major impact of African Americans in these four wars and that they will gain an appreciation for these men of great valor. Though there was much hostility and discrimination towards the Negro/African American soldier during times of war, the focus will be instead on the great achievements that have gone untold. The
students will ultimately discover the paladins who have been unfortunately left out of our textbooks.

Revolutionary War

In 1776, the Revolutionary War began when the thirteen colonies declared their independence from Great Britain. However, in 1770, the first patriotic martyr of the war was shot during the Boston Massacre. This inspirational figure was African American Crispus Attucks. Just five years later, black men began enlisting as Minutemen after the call of arms from Paul Revere. Several Negro(African American) fought to hold off the British early in the war until July 1775 when American Adjutant General Horatio Gates, acting under orders from George Washington, issued a directive to refuse to enlist “…any stroller, Negro(African American), or vagabond”(Lindenmeyer, 1970, pg. 17). However, this plan backfired on the Patriots. One British governor, Lord Dunmore realized that the Whig armies were not accepting black enlistees, he developed a plan to enable runaway slaves to win their freedom by joining the royal cause. An estimated 100,000 slaves on southern plantations joined the British voluntarily or were taken as
enemy property. Though some did eventually reach freedom as promised by the British troops, many were given to the tories, sold to the West Indies, or moved to Canada (Weir, 2004).

In 1776, the Continental Army was in need of “able-bodied” men as enlistments for troops began to expire and the interest of white’s fighting in the war was on the declining. Already an obvious underdog, the Patriots needed more man power. It was then that the people of the colonies began to argue the idea of black men as soldiers.

Regardless of the debate for or against the use of NegroAfrican Americanses as soldiers in the Continental Army, they were put in uniform and armed. Thousands of black men volunteered to defend their home while others were enlisted in place of their white master. Washington’s army had an average of around fifty NegroAfrican Americanses to each battalion; at least seven hundred NegroAfrican Americanses fought on the colonists’ side at the Battle of Monmouth, and the state of Maryland recruited seven hundred and fifty, who were incorporated with whites (Alt, 2002, pg. 23).—Whether they fought for the British or the Continental Army, the black man fought long, hard, and faithfully in the Revolutionary War. (Alt, 2002, pg. 23).
Almost a century later the newly formed nation faced its own problems from within. After eleven southern states seceded from the Union, the United States Civil War began in 1861. The institution of slavery in the South had a great bearing on the causes of this war. Immediately many black men rose up to fight for the Union but were refused service until years into the war. The Emancipation Proclamation was proclaimed in 1863 and not only did it free all slaves in rebelling states, but also created an active recruitment policy for black soldiers. The Negro/African American fought mostly on the side of the Union Army but was also found assisting the rebels, mostly doing “dirty jobs” (Alt, 2002, pg. 34).

The Union Army called upon the black man to take up arms and fight for the cause. About 186,000 African Americans fought with the Union. This included 120 regiments, seven cavalry regiments, twelve heavy artillery regiments, and ten light artillery batteries (Weir, 2004). Though most had white officers, there were more than 7,000 black officers in the Union army which altogether was made of nine to ten percent black, including 25% of the Union navy (Edgerton, 2001, pg. 72). The most significant black regiment, the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Regiment was formed with 1,000 volunteers under the command of abolitionist Robert Gould Shaw. These men saw
much action and are well known for their courageous fighting at Fort Wagner where Sergeant William Carney became the first African American to be nominated for the Congressional Medal of Honor. Nearly forty thousand African Americans would be killed and individuals who had believed that blacks could not become soldiers or would not fight as well as whites were proved wrong (Alt, 2002, pg. 42).

So rally, boys, rally.
Let us never mind the past,
We had a hard road to travel
But our day is coming fast.
For God is for the right
And we have no need to fear.
The union must be saved

By the colored volunteer. (Alt, 2002, pg. 42)

World War I

The United States entered the first World War in 1914 with hopes to make the world safe for democracy. African American leaders, including W.E.B. Du Bois encouraged black men to put aside any grievances they may have with the white population and fight for their nation, and in hopes that this would end both discrimination and insult. Many blacks were refused at recruiting stations but in 1917, Congress passed the Selective Service Act and once again black men swarmed the recruiting stations. Approximately 2,291,000 blacks registered but unfortunately a total of 367,000 were taken. About 89% of the enlisted black men were assigned to labor,
supply, and service units. Only about 11% would ever see combat (Buckley, 2001, g. 165).

The United States sent two black divisions to Europe, the 92nd and 93rd Division. Though the 92nd Division did not get to see as much battle, several regiments of the 93rd saw extensive action and even received awards from the French government. The 369th Regiment joined the French 4th Army in the Oise-Aisne offensive and remained in the trenches for 191 days, the longest front line service of any American regiment (Donaldson, 1991, pg. 94). One Frenchman proclaimed, “It is because these soldiers are just as brave and just as devoted as white soldiers that they receive exactly the same treatment, every man being equal before the death which all soldier face (Buckley, 2001, pg. 164). Though the black man began to see more action, black officers were gaining number, and the French saw the black man as a respectable, hardworking soldier, still discrimination and segregation continued after the conclusion of WWI.

World War II

Over twenty years later, American joined in the second World War after a surprise bombing by the Japanese at Pearl Harbor. At Pearl Harbor America saw one of the first heroes of WWII, African American mess man, Dorie Miller. Miller was awarded the Navy cross after he first pulled a wounded captain to safety then proceeded to shoot down as many as four Japanese planes. World War II had begun and once again African Americans jumped to take part in serving their country.

During this World War II, the need for men to take up arms dramatically accelerated the expansion of the roles for black men in the military. The father-son duo of Colonel Benjamin O. Davis Sr. and Captain Benjamin O. Davis Jr. set the tone for the
advancement of the black soldier as the only two black officers in the army at the start of
the war. Over 1,154,720 black men served in WWII with over half of them seeing
service overseas. Altogether black men constituted some 7.7 percent of the Armed
Forces, including: 9 percent of the Army; 5.9 percent of the Navy; 2.2 percent of the
Coast Guard; and even 3.7 percent of the Marines which were the only branch of U.S.
military to be integrated. Also, about 4,000 women served in the WACs (Women’s
Army Corps) in the army and 60 in the WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer
Emergency Service) in the navy (Lindemeyer, 1970, pg. 88). Black divisions fought
overseas in the Ninety-ninth Pursuit Squadron – first all-black flying unit, the 92nd
Infantry Division in Italy, as well with General Patton in the 761st, all-black battalion.

WWII brought great hope for African Americans in military though black and white
soldiers were still segregated. In 1948 President Harry Truman made an executive order
to desegregate all armed forces (Donaldson, 1991, pg. 135).

Conclusion

African Americans played a role in every war fought for the United States of
America. These brave soldiers put aside their differences to fight for the sake or their
country—even when the white man did not. Though they were discriminated against
and not given recognition, they took up arms in hopes of making a difference. These
men and women were successful in assisting their country to victory and should be
commended. After completion of this unit students will understand the risks taken by the
men of color, African Americans and have an appreciation for their bravery in a country
that once saw them as inferior.
Activities:

Activity 1
- The students will analyze the participation of African Americans who fought with the Patriots during the Revolutionary War.
  - They will then write a letter to George Washington, leader of the Continental Army to urge him to allow African Americans to fight along with the Patriots.

Activity 2
- The students will discuss the reasons African Americans fought for the Royal cause.
  - Imagine you are an African American who has been recruited to join the British Army and have decided you are going to go. Write a letter to your family explaining why you have chosen to do so.
Activity 3
- The students will identify the important significance the African American troops had on the Union army.
  - Once the Union decided that they would allow African American troops to fight for them, they began to recruit the masses. Create a recruiting poster urging African Americans to take up arms with the Union Army. The poster should include how siding with the Union Army would benefit them.

Activity 4
- The students will analyze the movie Glory.
  - While watching the move the students will be required to answer the following questions then discuss them at the end of the movie.
    - How were African American troops treated? Give three examples from the movie to support your answer.
    - Do you think this is a fairly accurate portrayal of the 54th Massachusetts or has it also been written as the white man wants it to be perceived?

Activity 5
- The students will design a memorial for a U.S. African American troop.
  - The students will have a choice of writing a poem, designing a tombstone, or create an award for their recognition.

Activity 6
- The students will discuss the involvement of African Americans in WWI.
  - Despite the racial hatred and discrimination blacks faced daily in society, should they have fought for the U.S. in WWI? In The Crisis, W.E.B. Du Bois proclaims “First your country, then your Rights!” Do you agree with this statement? Explain your reasoning in a one page reaction. http://edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=497

Activity 7
- The students will analyze the 396th Regiment of WWI.
  - This all-black regiment fought with the French for 191 days in the Champagne-Marne offensive. The students will research life in the trenches then act out what life would be like in one of these trenches.
Activity 8
- The students will discuss the impact that African Americans had in WWII.
  o If possible, interview an African American relative or friend who lived during WWII. Ask of their involvement in the war or the involvement of their race. Also, how did they feel about segregated divisions in the military? Report your findings to the class.

Activity 9
- The students will conclude the unit with a research paper.
  o They students will be required to write a research paper on a black soldier who they believe is a hero. The paper must include extensive research on their background and the war they fought in, as well as an explanation as to why they are a hero to you.
    ▪ These papers will be combined to form a new textbook for each of the students. The textbook will be called “Concealed Heroism: The heroes your teacher never told you about.”

Activity 10
- The students will celebrate the lives of those African American soldiers who fought for our nation.
  o In this final lesson the students will share their research with one another and have a memorial for these brave men and women. This will give African American soldiers the recognition they so deserve.

Bibliography


African Heartbeat: Transatlantic Literary and Cultural Dynamics, by Nancy Ann Watanabe, traces the influence of West African cosmological theology in contemporary American culture employing a methodology of comparative textual analysis in detailed discussions in Chapter One of Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin and Hollywood director Tony Scott's film Enemy of the State featuring One of the genuine pleasures of teaching African-American Studies today is the satisfaction of being able to restore to the historical record events and the individuals whose sacrifices and bravery created those events, never to be lost again. Few institutions from the black past have attracted more attention recently from teachers, students, museum curators and the tourism industry than the Underground Railroad, one of the most venerable and philanthropic innovations in our ancestors' long and dreadful history in human bondage. Doing so only makes the sacrifices and heroism of our ancestors and their allies all the more noble, heroic and impressive. Simply put, this is one of the oddest myths propagated in all of African-American history.