During the sixtieth anniversary of the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor and on the heels of the terrible events of September 11, 2001, Brent Staples, in an op-ed piece for the New York Times, struck a chord when he observed how Hollywood movies tended to adopt a multicultural lens to describe the American experience in World War II. Commenting on the motion picture film Pearl Harbor and the role of Doris “Dorie” Miller, played by Cuba Gooding Jr., Staples points out that “the movie ends with Miller smiling proudly over his Navy Cross, but it fails to note that the Navy declined to issue it for several months while the Pittsburgh Courier led the Negro Press in a scorching indictment of military segregation that threatened to drive black voters out of the Democratic Party.” He went on to correctly assert that contemporary movies about the wartime period have recycled many of the misconceptions that have shaped the American experience in the war because they, like their predecessors, have consistently failed to grapple with the military racism that “makes black heroism all the more remarkable.” “In doing so, the movies have left the mistaken impression that heroism in the ‘greatest generation’ came exclusively with a white face,” Staples concludes.1

Although Staples was writing some sixty years after the end of the fighting, the Hollywood version of the heroic American World War II soldier that he describes epitomizes the titanic challenges of researching and writing about the history of African American GIs and their communities in World War II, as well as understanding the rich, contradictory legacy black veterans left behind. Far from appearing as “whitened heroes” or soldiers “missing in action,” African Americans who stood in the ranks of the segregated army of World War II held their own notions of manhood and bravery that defy conventional wisdom and categorization. And it is the perceptions that black GIs held of themselves as fighting soldiers and the worlds that framed their identities as men that make up the subject of this book.
The sources that shaped this study beckoned me from the very beginning. What began as a stab in the dark to write a case study of the men who served in the U.S. 93rd Infantry Division ended with a deep plunge into the heady waters of social and cultural history. In the early 1990s, when I began researching the men who served in the division, there were few books that fully chronicled the division’s contribution to the Second World War, let alone books that tried to capture the thoughts and actions of the men who served in its ranks. I was told over and over again throughout my graduate study at the University of Michigan that I might not be able to locate many of these soldiers “because they may not want to talk about their experiences.” Undaunted, I set out to attack the subject on a number of fronts. Turning first to a series of rosters of the division members recorded between 1942 and 1945 secured from the National Archives and Records Administration, I contacted the Retired Officers Association, the Disabled American Veterans of America, and other veterans’ organizations to see whether they had the addresses for the individuals who appeared on the lists. I also placed a number of op-ed pieces and plaintive ads in a number of black weeklies, hoping to locate surviving members of the unit. What I thought would yield only a few individuals soon produced a deluge of responses from the former division members themselves. Once my inquiries appeared in the pages of veterans’ newspapers and journals, my mailbox and answering machine soon overflowed with letters, cards, and calls from veterans who wanted to talk with me about their wartime experiences.

At one point during this period, when I returned home from a week of researching the division’s activities in the National Archives, my wife, Lisa, told me that our phone had been ringing off the hook with people wanting to talk with me. But what my wife and I failed to realize at the time was that the responses of the former division members would overtake our lives on a different front. On a weekly basis between 1990 and 1995, I would receive some three hundred pieces of correspondence from the veterans along with various artifacts that they wished to share with me. Among the items I received were scores of military service records, photographs, service-related memorabilia, unpublished narratives, and personal correspondence penned by the veterans to family members and friends during the wartime period. Soon, our small one-bedroom apartment in Ann Arbor, Michigan, began to resemble a museum commemorating the experiences of members of the U.S. 93rd Infantry Division and their families.

Once I identified the former GIs who served with the unit, I began to survey the veterans to retrieve their recollections of their World War II service, a process that was expensive and time consuming. I developed a ten-page questionnaire and mailed 584 copies of the survey to the self-selected veterans and received
226 responses. The survey began with questions about their family history, geographical origin, pre-war communities, education, and occupations and ended with queries about their assessment of their wartime experiences. This information was crucial because it allowed me to get a better sense of their lived experiences before the formal interview process. After sifting through this material, I arranged to meet with 130 veterans and their families; most of the interviews took place between 1991 and 2002 in areas as far ranging as Cleveland, Ohio; Asheville, North Carolina; the District of Columbia; Sierra Vista, Arizona; Chicago; Stockton, California; Milwaukee; Atlanta; Tampa; and Newark, Delaware.

I wanted to write a book about the men who served in the division, but I realized that the story encompassed much more. My interviewing sessions with the veterans were often emotion-filled episodes during which I learned a great many things about the men and women associated with the unit and their children and grandchildren. First, all the former GIs were very gracious in welcoming me into their home. But once I sat down with them in their living room or at their kitchen table, they sometimes disclosed more than they initially intended, often resulting in idiosyncratic interview sessions that took on lives and personalities of their own. For example, I met with one veteran who, upon recalling how he felt when he entered military service, quickly repaired to his bedroom only to return moments later fully dressed in his wartime military uniform with tears streaming down his face. He then told me the story of how, as a callow 18-year-old Detroit youth going through the paces of basic training at Fort Huachuca, Arizona, he met General Benjamin O. Davis Sr. for the first time. And in the process of telling the story, he recalled the pride he felt in knowing that he had contributed to something significant.

Second, the memories involving the experiences of the men who served with the 93rd were family enterprises, each invested with its own allegorical meaning. While meeting with the family members of a former GI in Milwaukee, my wife and I choked back tears when his widow bitterly recounted her husband’s desperate efforts to rebuild his life after he returned from overseas duty in 1945. After providing us with vivid examples of his postwar struggles, she ended by looking at me and saying, “He was never the same afterwards. Remember, young man, war continues long after the firing ceases.” It was these bittersweet memories rendered by former servicemen and their families, along with those provided by countless others along the way, that spoke to me and expanded my imaginative powers in ways that microfilm and archival collections could not with regard to the experiences and legacy of the soldiers who served in segregated units like the U.S. 93rd Infantry Division during World War II.
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