Fighting for Hope

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Introduction

Recasting the African American Experience in World War II

The Negro's contribution to the winning of the war will never be properly evaluated. As I see it, there are two reasons. One is that those who have the facts do not consider it important enough to warrant separate study. The second reason is that Negro writers who have the interest, and who do think it is important to appraise the Negro's contribution to the war, do not have the intelligence to sift the important facts from the trivial.

George N. Leighton

Hope, if we keep fighting; fighting, as we keep hope.

W. E. B. Du Bois, 1943

It was a moment filled with fellowship, tribute, and sobering reflection. In April 1969, fifteen former GIs and their families journeyed to the ranch-style home of George and Helen Higgins in Pasadena, California, to commemorate their wartime experiences. After the group settled on the well-worn wicker chairs and sofas in the modestly furnished living room, the former servicemen spent a long night revisiting their wartime experiences as members of the U.S. 93rd Infantry Division during the Second World War. As they huddled together that evening, proud and dignified in the midst of surviving family members and friends, they couldn't help but place their wartime memories in the context of their daily issues of concern.

Among the women, men, children, grandchildren, and friends who traveled to recount past trials and tribulations sat Walter Greene; his wife, Freida Bailey; and their sons, Walter III and Gregory. As for most of the service families present that day, World War II and the 93rd Infantry Division held special relevance for Walter and Freida. Born in Detroit in 1917, Walter Greene was the son of a promi-
In the Pacific, Greene and other members of his regiment fought not only the hostile enemy and the treacherous terrain but also endless bouts of racism within their own army. For example, he and other soldiers in his regiment were assigned to unload ships while similarly seasoned white combat units advanced through the areas toward Japan. Greene suffered further insult when he and nine other black commissioned officers were ordered to attend a special officers training school that was established for poor soldiers on a nearby island by division headquarters. Greene and other officers responded by waging what he called “the war within the war,” staging sit-down strikes and refusing to answer to roll call on a number of occasions. Although the rebellious actions taken by Greene and other black GIs represented an ad hoc response to the numerous impossible conditions they faced within the segregated army, they had a tremendous impact on his thinking at the time. After being shipped home to receive treatment for dengue fever in early 1945, Greene bitterly remarked: “You have to understand. Overseas, a man has a lot of time to precipitate his thoughts. While serving over there, I learned that segregation is fostered at the top. Those on the bottom go along because it bolsters their ego. One thing is certain to me, however. The Negro soldier is going to be militant because he is looking for something—he expects something better than the status quo when he gets home or the public will have a severe problem on its hands.”

Greene returned home to Detroit to find that, although the racial climate in the city had not changed at all, his outlook regarding social and political empowerment had been fundamentally transformed as a result of his Pacific experiences. Shortly thereafter, he translated his political thoughts born in the wartime emergency into postwar action, working as an employment negotiator and adjudication officer for disabled former servicemen in the Veterans Administration and as a field representative with the Michigan Fair Employment Practices Commission before becoming the acting director of the regional office of the contract com-
pliance program within the Department of Defense in 1967. In this capacity, Greene continued to fight for civil rights causes, demanding that the University of Michigan take bolder steps in its recruitment of African American students and faculty, adopting measures to increase the number of black women and men in city government, and later—as Detroit’s first African American deputy mayor—railing publicly against corporations that decided to move their operations out of Detroit during the winter months of 1969. Traveling to Pasadena and seeing his former comrades in arms produced a flood tide of emotions for Greene as it became evident to him that the hard political lessons they learned from their struggles in the segregated army informed their present commitment to their respective communities. Looking back at his wartime experiences during the gathering, Greene leaned over to his longtime friends who were seated in the living room and remarked, “There is a certain comradeship among us for no one else can understand what we’ve been through and the sacrifices we made in the man’s army.”

Although Greene didn’t realize it at the time, his life partner understood all too well the hardships endured by him and the other former division members who were in attendance that evening. But for the proud and dignified Freida Bailey, the gathering evoked a different set of memories, for she had her own story to tell about her husband’s wartime past. Born in Oklahoma in 1918, Bailey was the product of a household of homesteaders who migrated from Mississippi and Tennessee to the western territories in the late 1870s in search of land, prosperity, and autonomy. During the late 1920s, Freida and her family moved to Detroit, where she worked as a waitress while attending Michigan State Normal School (now Eastern Michigan University) in nearby Ypsilanti before transferring to Detroit’s Wayne University. Shortly after graduating with a bachelor’s degree in elementary education, she secured sporadic assignments as a substitute teacher in the city public school system, where she met and married Walter Greene in early 1940. She had no sooner accepted a permanent teaching position in Detroit when Walter received a letter from his local draft board in 1941 informing him that he had been selected for induction into the U.S. Army.

Throughout Walter’s training stint in Georgia and California, Freida and her husband, like so many young couples at the time, had to grapple with the difficulties in their relationship born of the demands made by the wartime emergency, military service, and white racism. Walter Greene’s stateside training meant time away from his wife, siblings, and elderly parents. So it fell to Freida Bailey to keep the family going. Throughout 1942 and 1943, she spent much of her time traveling the considerable distances between Detroit and the Georgia and California training centers to see Walter and to keep him abreast of news affecting his fami-
ily and hometown community. In December 1943, she journeyed to Needles, California, to urge her husband to hurry home after learning that Greene’s father was dying.

But just as Greene waged “his war within the war” against racial discrimination in the segregated army, Bailey and other black service women, children, and men developed their own responses to the war. During one of her periodic visits to the Mojave Desert area, Bailey lived with Ethel Tabor, Vera Sarazen, Wilamina Biddieux, and other women whose husbands were training nearby, and they formed a social group. Calling themselves the “Poinsettia Club,” Bailey and the other relatives gathered with soldiers on a number of occasions to openly debate the issues that shaped the daily experiences of black GIs and their families. The informal institution the service family members created and the issues and agendas they addressed made a lasting impression on Bailey and the other members of the group. Of the wartime organization they created and the sense of responsibility they felt toward each other as black military community members, she later recalled, “The house we lived in was made up of three boxcars, and it was important to the fellows because this gave them a chance to drive in every Saturday night, catch up on family news, and talk about things that happened in the division without worrying about being brought up on charges.”

The wartime experiences and recollections of the Greenes are more instructive than those of World War II GIs and families presented in other works because they illuminate the complex nature of the 93rd Infantry Division’s campaign and the paradoxical struggles of African Americans who lived on the home front during the wartime period. On appearance, division personnel and their family members and friends bear only a slight resemblance to the group theory analyses of recent studies. For example, once arriving at a military base, new recruits—all sporting different hair and clothing styles—are marched off to a nearby supply depot and barbershop where they undergo a change in appearance upon which they all seem rather indistinguishable from each other. But appearances can be deceiving. While the recruits might appear the same, they are still fully embodied human beings, possessing a range of economic, work, social, family, and folk backgrounds as diverse as the regions from which they came, the military occupational specialties to which they are later assigned, and the wartime aspirations they express and hope to translate into action.

This book is not intended to be a traditional military history; rather, it examines the social experiences of black 93rd Infantry Division GIs and service-related communities and their relations with the U.S. military during the wartime period. Using archival records, oral histories, and personal correspondence, it explores
the political and cultural boundaries of the African American presence in the 93rd Infantry Division during the Second World War and the extent to which both identity and community shaped the parameters of the black experience in the segregated army. In many ways, the experiences of the men who served in the 93rd Infantry Division epitomize the political motivations, purposes, and objectives that framed the black experience in general in World War II. First, the unit was the first segregated division created in that war and was composed of white senior staff officers and African American junior officers. Owing to the wartime emergency, nearly 55 percent of its nearly 20,000-man enlisted corps were draftees; they came from Texas, New York, Florida, California, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, West Virginia, and Illinois. Consisting of the 368th, 369th, and 25th Infantry regiments and an assortment of field companies, battalions, and special service units, the division saw limited action in the Pacific during World War II and spent much of its time relieving other units as they advanced toward the Philippines during the latter stages of the war. For much of the war, the unit was relegated to non-combat roles, and the accounts of its wartime contribution have been written from the standpoints of War Department officials and social scientists—people who were more interested in assessing the unit’s combat performance, the racist connotations of army discipline and efficiency, and the degree of racial contact between black and white soldiers than in exploring the human element of the Jim Crow army during the period. As a consequence, the perspectives of black servicemen themselves and the ways in which black enlisted men and officers constructed their identities as soldiers have been obscured.

Even groundbreaking works on the contributions made by black soldiers in U.S. history have not explored the attitudes of black service personnel and their families toward military service and citizenship and the ways in which their perspectives coincided and competed with state institutions like the armed forces and civil society. Thus, instead of a fully constituted soldier whose identity is shaped by race, gender, class, and generation, we are presented with a soldier who is largely disconnected from American society. By shifting the perspective away from questions of combat efficiency and race relations, Fighting for Hope allows one to gain a fuller understanding of the making of African American soldiers during the Second World War and its immediate aftermath.

Second, the multifaceted dimensions of black World War II political culture and the class, gender, and spatial fissures within it have been muted in unity aphorisms and golden age sentimentality. For example, most scholars have used concepts such as “greatest generation,” “watershed moments,” and “double victory” in interpreting African American battlefront and home front attitudes
and behavior during the Second World War.\textsuperscript{5} However, these terms obscure, rather than reveal, the realities of wartime struggle. The experiences of black service-men in the segregated American army and of their family members and military-community friends suggest that their thoughts and actions fluctuated widely according to time, place, and circumstance and were far more complex than we have ever imagined. For black 93rd GIs and their kith and kin, physical battles and struggles for dignity were fought on the same terrain: that of white racism and class antagonism. And although the conduct and character of black soldiers in the division came under fire from many policymakers and senior army officials, the unit also attracted widespread support from the white cadre of the segregated army during the period. Furthermore, just as the war and military service provided the vehicle through which broader discussions regarding democracy and citizenship could take place, they also reinforced the social hierarchy within African American society at the time.

What's more, the relationship between the state and African Americans during World War II as presented in most social histories dealing with wartime black political activism looks different when viewed from the vantage point of African American GIs and their loved ones. For example, although many policymakers within the War Department remained deeply committed to long-standing segregation policies with respect to black soldiers, they disagreed widely over how the measures were to be implemented during the wartime period. The resulting cleavages within the segregated army allowed African American GIs and service-related communities to frame, interpret, and define the contours of their World War II experiences in their own terms. For Walter and Freida Greene and other 93rd Division families and friends, however, efforts to negotiate and contest the shibboleths of Jim Crow society did not end with battles of World War II but continued well into the postwar period, against the ever-changing montage of twentieth-century American life. Indeed, the relationship between the state and the men who made up the 93rd Infantry Division and their loved ones is as much a portrait of grassroots political struggle and its victories and defeats during the war as it is a story of the emergence of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

Encompassing the fields of African American history, military history, and gender and sexuality studies, \textit{Fighting for Hope} examines the ways in which black GIs in the 93rd Infantry Division shaped the boundaries of their World War II experiences; it does so by illuminating the conflicting encounters between the GIs, American society, and the state during the war and in its immediate aftermath. Reflective of W. E. B. Du Bois's incisive analysis of the African American strug-
gles for equality in 1943, these relations, I contend, were tempered by experience and infused with hope as each group embraced opposing visions of citizenship. Nowhere was this tenuous connection more apparent than in the unique political worldview that informed the thoughts and actions of the black 93rd GIs who toiled in the training areas and theaters of operation during the wartime period. Created in black neighborhoods and communities long before they entered the military, this critical worldview was bound up in notions of race and gender and served as a vital conduit through which issues regarding American democracy and citizenship were openly discussed and hotly debated.

By the end of the 93rd Division’s campaign in World War II, a political strategy enveloped in household and community concerns was dialogically fused with the barracks experiences of black GIs to form a unique political culture that reaffirmed their identities throughout their military experiences. The combined political perspectives of black soldiers and their families and friends were employed to negotiate and contest the state power and the images that senior army commanders, Roosevelt administration officials, and American society held of African Americans in uniform. And at the same time, the political culture devised by black 93rd servicemen and their loved ones, friends, and neighbors both challenged and reinforced notions that black spokespeople and organizations held of them as “African American fighting men.” Once the shooting war ended, black 93rd veterans refashioned this worldview as they struggled to make sense of the social and political challenges that African Americans faced during the Cold War years of the late 1940s and the emerging civil rights movement. Indeed, throughout the immediate postwar period, this perspective carried contradictory and (in some instances) tragic consequences for the former servicemen and their families.

_Fighting for Hope_ begins with an examination of future African American 93rd Division servicemen during the years of the Great Depression in order to firmly situate them within the worlds from which they came and the hopes they held for the future. Chapter 1 documents the political context in which the initial encounters between black 93rd GIs, American society, and the state had taken place. Chapter 2 focuses on the American mobilization during World War II and charts the attitudes of young African Americans regarding America's foreign involvement and their prospects for military service. It also illuminates the public debate that ensued between black civic and political leaders, labor and civil liberties groups, the Roosevelt administration, and military officials over the possibility of allowing African Americans to enter the ranks of the army. Chapter 3 reconstructs the stateside training experiences of black service personnel while division members were assigned to Fort Huachuca, Arizona.
Part Two illuminates the social and political contexts in which African American 93rd Infantry Division soldiers and their families articulated their visions of American citizenship and where their views stood in relation to the explosive soldier-civilian confrontations of 1943 and the insistent clamoring among segments of African American society to make full use of black troops in the armed conflict. This portion of the narrative illustrates the complexities of the public debate over the employment of black GIs. Adjusting the analytical lens a bit, Chapter 4 chronicles the development of local service-related groups, church organizations, medical societies, and newspapers among relatives of the division members in order to examine the manner in which the attitudes expressed by the family-community networks regarding American citizenship both coalesced and clashed with the views held by division members at the time. Chapter 5 documents the social and political debate that took place between black 93rd GIs, American society, and Washington officials over the eventual deployment of the division and the unit’s movement to the South Pacific theater of operations.

Part Three focuses on the ways in which the social and political experiences of black 93rd Division members in the Pacific theater of operations reshaped their perspectives of race, citizenship, and American society. Chapter 6 chronicles the initial combat experiences of black 93rd GIs in the Solomon Islands and the discussions that black civic and political leaders and organizations and Washington officials held over their participation in combat and subsequent battlefield performances during the spring and summer months of 1944. It also demonstrates how the physical presence of black troops in uniform had both reconfigured and reinforced the army’s and American society’s racial and gendered markings of black bodies during various stages of the overseas campaign. Through a close examination of a chain of controversial events that occurred in the Southwest Pacific during the spring of 1945, Chapter 7 analyzes how race, sex, and international politics engulfed African American service personnel and their families.

Exploring the postwar lives of 93rd Infantry Division soldiers, the epilogue steps away from the narrative momentarily and discusses the extent to which the worldview developed among black veterans during the war changed yet again as veterans struggled to reestablish relationships with family members, neighbors, and friends. At the same time, their perspectives regarding state power, race relations, and gender conventions expanded beyond their immediate households to challenge the workplaces, schoolrooms, veterans administration offices, and statehouses of post–World War II America as American society and the state struggled to make sense of the enlarged claims to first-class citizenship that were being advanced by black 93rd servicemen from various parts of the country. As
the epilogue demonstrates, however, the political culture that was born during the wartime emergency and the enlarged claims to citizenship that it engendered proved to be short lived as 93rd Division veterans found themselves facing subtle yet far more devastating forms of racial, class, and gender oppression during the latter half of the twentieth century.

Finally, I would like to say a few words about how the writing of unit histories as case studies might provide the “missing” chapters in a larger work reassessing the black World War II past. Many recent studies have documented the black experience in World War II, and several have drawn comparisons between the experiences of black GIs in the World War II Asian-Pacific and European theaters of operations. These works have greatly facilitated our understanding of the African American experience during this momentous period. But not until we pay closer attention to the relationship between the activities of specific service personnel in particular locales and the communities and neighborhoods in which they lived and labored will we even come close to a more comprehensive portrait of the black World War II experience. Then and only then will we be able to properly evaluate African Americans’ contribution to the winning of the war.
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