Fighting for Hope

Jefferson, Robert F.

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The Great Depression and African American Youth Culture

I think of the blessings that have come to American youth through the programs of the National Youth Administration and the Civilian Conservation Corps, displacing delinquency and crime by the green pastures of education and work. What has happened to Negro youth in a program like this? Thousands who have been asleep in shiftlessness and despair have been awakened to a life of usefulness and hope. No, “we’ll never turn back no more,” to the apathy of indifference; to the growing disintegration of youthful dreams and visions.

Mary McLeod Bethune, 1939

In 1934, 19-year-old Leo Logan faced an unsettling future. Born in Leavenworth, Kansas, in 1915, Logan was raised in a poor working-class family, his mother struggling to support him after the death of her husband and three children. After Leo graduated from high school in 1933, he spent much of his time working an assortment of jobs, ranging from short-order cook to custodian. Finding work in Leavenworth, a town that was deep in the throes of the Great Depression, was most difficult for the teenager: “The first job that I had was unloading sand from a railroad car on a hot Kansas summer day, which was hot, dusty, and sweaty work,” he recalled. After failing to secure steady employment, he entered the Civilian Conservation Corps in 1934 and was able to send a portion of his monthly pay to his mother.

Although sketchy, Logan’s experience in the CCC had long-term implications. He was deeply influenced by the military regimentation in the CCC, regaling in the wearing of uniforms and the sense of purpose within the organization. Furthermore, he was so deeply touched by the rhythmic tramping feet of his neigh-
bors who marched in the Citizens’ Military Training Camp parades held each summer that he entered the camp in 1937. He participated in the CMTC for two years while he attended Ottawa University. Yet despite his penchant for military training, Logan challenged the racist aspects of the segregated army and had frequently participated with other corps members in attempts to improve their treatment and working conditions. In his efforts to elicit a modicum of respect from the white cadre in the CCC and the CMTC, Logan faced charges of insubordination on numerous occasions after he protested against racial indignities of Jim Crow military life. He eventually enlisted in the army at Fort Leavenworth in 1941. Recalling his decision to enter the military years later, Logan stated, “I wasn’t particularly patriotic and I volunteered for the service because I figured that I would be drafted sooner or later.”

Logan’s pre-war experiences offer a window into the social and political spaces that young black people occupied during the Great Depression. Alarmed by the growing numbers of unemployed African Americans, federal government officials and civic leaders sought to direct black youth into military-like programs such as the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Citizens’ Military Training Camps, and the Army Reserve Officers’ Training Corps. For Leo Logan, however, organizations like the CCC were more than just a source of employment: they provided instruction in military training. To be sure, these organizations marked a transitional phase between the Great Depression and World War II for this generation of young Americans. But one must remember that the regional, race, class, and gender cleavages present in American society at the time also shaped these programs. Upon entering these organizations, young black men struggling to make sense of these issues in society at large also confronted them in the military-structured formations in which they stood. So in many ways the experiences of Leo Logan and others during the 1930s were, as Mary McLeod Bethune has explained, forged in both “despair” and “hope.”

The Civilian Conservation Corps

The life histories of young African Americans like Leo Logan were deeply mired in the economic crises of the 1930s. Between 1925 and 1930, the labor participation rate for black working-age males (those between 16 and 24) declined from 85 percent to 82 percent. By 1940, the proportion dipped even lower, to 67 percent, reflecting a loss of thousands of positions in the agricultural, service, and industrial sectors due to whole-scale layoffs and firings. Although illuminating,
these figures minimize the economic woes that African American youth faced during the 1930s.

But when examined more closely, relief figures enumerated for the mid-1930s tell another story about black youth unemployment. In January 1935, the Social Research Division of the Works Progress Administration reported that the number of black working-age males (those from 16 to 24) constituted approximately 36 percent of the 2,877,000 unemployed workers in the nation, reflecting a rate higher than that of all other working-age groups. Furthermore, nearly 29 percent were on relief in urban areas, compared with just 14 percent in rural places. By October, the numbers of unemployed black youth in rural areas dipped to 625,000 as many blacks were transferred from the Federal Emergency Relief Administration to the Resettlement Administration. In northern and midwestern industrial states like Michigan, New York, and Pennsylvania, the percentage of black youth nearly trebled their representation in the workforce. In the District of Columbia, Georgia, Louisiana, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Texas, nearly 45 percent of the young black population received some form of relief. By 1937, the percentage of young black relief recipients in metropolitan cities like Los Angeles, Chicago, Cincinnati, St. Louis, Chattanooga, New Orleans, and Cleveland hovered between 11 and 32 percent, reflecting a percentage close to or slightly above their proportions in the total population.

These conditions made an indelible impression upon 17-year-old Henry L. Williams. Born and raised in a poor working-class family, Williams struggled to make a living after his parents died, working as a dishwasher, bellman, elevator operator, waiter, and chauffeur. When the depression hit Cleveland, he recalled, “there were very few opportunities for college.” “So I worked as many jobs and as often as I could manage.” Eventually landing work as a life insurance salesman, Williams continued to struggle until he was drafted into the armed forces in February 1941.

Meanwhile in the rural hinterlands, the magnitude of black youth unemployment was greater. Working largely as agricultural and unskilled wage laborers in rural southern regions characterized by a feudal sharecropping system, low wages, and deplorable living conditions, future 93rd Division service personnel toiled with family members on nearby farms, planting and picking cotton, tobacco, berries, and vegetables during the summer and winter months throughout the 1930s. But once the harvest season ended, black youth, like their fathers, had little choice but to seek work in textile mills and coal mines in nearby cities and towns, often unable to gain employment. Such was the experience of 13-year-old
Raymond Jenkins. Born into a poor working-class family in 1924, Jenkins left his home in Memphis to roam the countryside in search of work. Hoping to supplement his mother’s earnings as a domestic, Jenkins, who had previously landed work as a delivery boy and cotton picker, abandoned his search after failing to secure employment. In search of better employment opportunities, Jenkins made his way to Detroit, where he was drafted in 1943.10

As he entered the Motor City, Raymond Jenkins and other future division personnel stood at the doorway of a new life. Between 1933 and 1939, a small segment of future 93rd Division personnel participated in segregated CCC companies scattered throughout the country. Many black youth who were attracted to the wide array of opportunities that the CCC offered in early 1933 were denied entrance, however, despite the measure specifying that there would be no discrimination on the basis of race, color, or creed. Operating under the aegis of the departments of War, Agriculture, Interior, and Labor, the Veterans Administration, and CCC director Robert Fechner, CCC state agents and army corps area commanders adopted policies that restricted the selection of black enrollees to approximately 10 percent of the total enrollment; reflecting the proportional ratio of African Americans in the entire U.S. population.11

In some ways, paramilitary organizations like the CCC served as the midwives to the World War II experiences of many 93rd Infantry Division members. In March 1935, the army recruiting officer in Berks County, Pennsylvania, had refused to accept previously selected black enrollees, claiming that there “were no vacancies for colored men.”12 When Roy Wilkins of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and other leaders questioned the Labor Department’s selection of blacks for the CCC on these occasions, personnel enrollment head W. Frank Persons, the CCC director, and War Department officials assured them that no discrimination of recruits had taken place while at the same time continuing to select them as replacements in all-black contingents—a clear violation of the nondiscriminatory clause in the CCC law.13 Selection policies varied widely, however. Although selection agents in states such as Texas, New York, Georgia, Florida, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Alabama were reluctant to enroll an equitable proportion of black applicants, the enrollment of African Americans in South Carolina climbed to well over 35 percent in 1933, 10 percent more than their proportion of the state’s population.14 Yet by December of that year, there were only 15,425 black enrollees among the 279,300 enrollees in the CCC, less than 6 percent of the total enrollment.15 To make matters worse, Civilian Conservation Corps officials followed local racist mores and practices and restricted black enrollees largely to isolated camps and areas throughout the country.
Between 1933 and 1934, approximately 1,514 black youths toiled in sixteen segregated CCC companies throughout the Third Corps area, composed of Virginia, Pennsylvania, Maryland, the District of Columbia, New Jersey, and Delaware. Yet War Department and CCC officials experienced tremendous difficulties establishing black camps throughout the Fourth Corps area because of local intransigence. Fourth Corps area commander General George Van Moseley refused to place many black companies after receiving some criticism. For example, Moseley and other War Department officials changed their plans to place an all-black camp near an exclusive resort area previously closed to black residents in North Carolina after white locals protested loudly against the initiative in July 1935. Responding to the rising tide of public criticism, Fechner advised the army to place black enrollees only in their states of origin. As the CCC continued throughout the 1930s, this policy was strictly followed. As late as 1939, for instance, when local residents protested against the placement of a black camp in Ohio, War Department officials transferred it to South Bend, Indiana. To further lessen public hostility, Fechner told the army to place some black companies at Fort Benning, Fort McClellan, and Fort Bragg, where they performed valuable conservation work.

But for black youth who hurdled the bureaucratic obstacles of institutional racism and discrimination, the Civilian Conservation Corps offered vast employment opportunities, vocational education, and a chance to challenge the imbalance of power that had circumscribed their lived experiences to that point. In CCC camps in Pennsylvania, for example, black youth linked race-conscious visions of the past with their present-day concerns by adopting company names such as Charles Young, in honor of the first African American West Point graduate; Robert L. Vann, for the famous newspaper editor; and Paul Laurence Dunbar, after the noted black poet.

The race consciousness of CCC camps as well as efforts to evade poverty and unemployment held special significance for Percy Roberts, a future 93rd Division member. Born into a poor family in Lincoln, Illinois, in 1914, Roberts had first learned of the CCC while making his living as a butler for a prominent local farmer and industrialist after graduating from high school. In July 1934, he went to Chicago, where he applied for CCC selection at the Cooke County Relief Administration office. Because he had done so well in the preliminary interviews and examinations, Roberts was recommended for CCC selection days later and was assigned to Company 605 of the all-black CCC Skokie Valley Camp located near Glenview, Illinois. Roberts and other camp members, who were largely natives of Chicago’s South Side, planted hundreds of acres of trees and constructed dikes, roads, and telephone lines. For his labor, he, like other CCC workers, received $30 a month,
of which $25 was sent to supplement his mother’s and father’s earnings as a do-
mestic and chauffeur, respectively. After work, Roberts participated in athletic and
recreational activities such as baseball, softball, basketball, and boxing and took
trips to Evanston. And it was in the ordered ranks and timed executions of regu-
lation drill and after seeing the army reserve officers that Roberts became inter-
ested in a military career. After spending three arduous years in the CCC, Roberts
promptly enlisted in the army in 1937, arriving at Fort Huachuca, where he was
assigned to the 25th Infantry Regiment, one of the triangular units of the 93rd
Infantry Division. Recalling his CCC experiences, Roberts noted, “The CCC was
a good preliminary move prior to joining the army, but I went in to help my fam-
ily out who was struggling.”

The military overtones that held Roberts’s attention were typical for CCC camps
during the period. Although scholars have pointed out that War Department
officials had not attempted to militarize the New Deal program because of an
acute awareness of critics who were suspicious of their intentions, elements of
military life may have pervaded its organization and administration. Specifically, discipline was emphasized: corps members wore uniforms, performed vari-
ations of regulation drill, and were supervised by Regular Army or reserve cap-
tains and first lieutenants. For example, when approximately 226 men between
18 and 25 years of age poured into Fort Howard, Maryland, during the spring of
1933, they received extensive training in military discipline under the watchful
eyes of army officers. During the two-week period, they were issued green uni-
forms, assigned to training units and barracks, learned to march to and from
work in platoon formations, and had every free minute of their leisure time sched-
uled. Although officers were white army personnel, camp leaders were selected
from among the ranks by the men themselves to administer discipline. Shortly
afterward, the recruits marched off to reserve station camps deep in the Mary-
land forest.

In January 1938, Eugene Boykin of the NAACP argued that black enlistment
in the CCC should be encouraged because black youths needed to be educated as
“citizens.” “Merely to give youths employment in useful tasks, however that may
be, is not enough,” he stated. Four months later, CCC educational director Howard
Oxley wrote the adjutant general, arguing that “citizenship courses” should be in-
augurated because “this would stem the radicalism of those who make trouble in
the camps.” Emphasizing camp responsibility, Oxley went on to argue that such
courses “would make the men respect their superiors and reduce the total num-
ber of desertions within the CCC.” The U.S. Office of Education adopted this pro-
posal, which was hardly contested, in July 1938.
courses in “citizenship,” black leaders and CCC officials made every effort to limit working-class identification within the companies.

Yet a strange irony emerged during this period. While CCC camp officials tried to stem “radicalism” among black youths, messages of race and class consciousness were communicated through the educational courses they received and the nature of the work they performed in the camps. Between 1933 and 1935, black CCC camp members at Texas’s Camp Sam Houston, Illinois’s Camp Skokie Valley, and Kansas’s Camp Lone Star who later served in the 93rd received courses in African American history as well as vocational instruction from educational advisers. Throughout Illinois, Pennsylvania, and Maryland, CCC workers read articles published in the Chicago Defender, the Pittsburgh Courier, and the Baltimore Afro-American that called attention to working conditions in other camps, and they were able to link their own working struggles to elements of the labor process that revealed themselves elsewhere. Facets of work culture were adopted as CCC company leaders were called foremen and directed the manual labor of their subordinates. In late 1934, for example, a company of CCC workers at Pennsylvania’s Camp Benezett chose Pittsburgh-born Odell Edwards as their foreman and planted trees and bower under his leadership. Edwards also assisted the camp commander in administering discipline, admonishing members when they violated camp regulations.

Interestingly, camp officials and foremen promulgated discipline in the CCC in ways similar to those used by the armed forces—from the top down. And like army personnel, CCC workers who violated company regulations received administrative and dishonorable discharges. In 1933, for instance, six black workers were arrested and incarcerated for disorderly conduct, and thirty-four others were sent back to Harlem with dishonorable discharges after they rebelled against the rigid disciplinary measures of camp authorities in Preston, New York. Two years later, CCC laborers at White Haven, Pennsylvania, received dishonorable discharges after they left the work site to protest against its deplorable living conditions. Meanwhile, Percy Roberts witnessed fellow members of his Skokie Valley’s CCC encampment express their discontent over camp conditions with their feet: close to four hundred received administrative and dishonorable discharges from the CCC for “absences without leave.” And in August 1940, twenty Skokie Valley enrollees were given dishonorable discharges after they refused to leave the mess hall to protest over the poor food they received.

Intra-racial class cleavages in black-supervised camps also surfaced when CCC workers disagreed with the labor policies of their superiors. At Camp Benezett, CCC workers were given dishonorable discharges in October 1935 after they at-
tempted to organize their fellow company members against Commander Oscar Pindle's running of the camp area, particularly the poor condition of the food and the heavy tasks they were required to perform.\textsuperscript{32} In late 1938, twenty-three CCC workers revolted against the poor food and working conditions in a segregated camp located near Camp Skokie Valley. To make matters worse, tensions in the camp heightened when foreman A. W. Underwood dismissed the demonstrators as “Northern Negroes thinking themselves better than Southern Negroes.” The protest ended several days later when camp authorities dismissed the black enrollees and transferred them back to their homes on Chicago's South Side.\textsuperscript{33} The alarming number of CCC protests in the Skokie Valley area led Illinois District investigator Harold G. Chafey to express these thoughts: “It is the opinion of the undersigned that the camp does not have a complete enough orientation program.”\textsuperscript{34} Shortly afterward, CCC educational advisers included orientation classes among their subjects of instruction.\textsuperscript{35} Despite the efforts made by CCC officials and camp administrators to stem discontent among CCC enrollees, however, the total number of AWOLs in the Skokie Valley area surged from 340 days lost in 1940 to 358 a year later.\textsuperscript{36}

The army’s role in the CCC and the labor processes that existed in the New Deal organization did not escape the attention of future 93rd Division members like William Fentress. Born in 1918 into a poor working-class family in San Antonio, Texas, Fentress entered a CCC camp near Fort Sam Houston, Texas, after graduating from high school in 1936. It was during his work building roads, planting trees, and toiling on wood-cutting details in the arid Texas heat that he came to realize the close relationship between civil and military policy—specifically, when he witnessed fellow company workers organizing to revolt against the insufficient amount of food being served in the camp. Recalling his experience years later, he stated, “My first job after high school was that of a CCC worker doing various jobs of common labor, and it was there that I got a vague idea of what military life could be like.” “The CCC, like military service, was hard work, and I was neither proud or [sic] ashamed of it.”\textsuperscript{37}

The Citizens' Military Training Camps

The decade prior to World War II also witnessed the training of many young black men as members of the Citizens' Military Training Camps. Created during the Preparedness Campaigns of 1915, the CMTC was aimed at young people and linked military training to citizenship. Between 1935 and 1940, thousands of working-class youths attended the nearly one hundred Citizens' Military Train-
ing Camps scattered across the country. Similar to those who served in the CCC, black young men in the CMTC found themselves standing face to face with the class system of the military as they also tried to improve their material conditions. Just getting through the CMTC was a feat in itself, since great emphasis was placed on discipline and mental and physical fitness. What’s more, black youths who applied and qualified for the CMTC’s basic course in the Third and Ninth Corps areas had to be physically capable residents of Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, the District of Columbia, and western states between the ages of 17 and 24. In addition, applicants faced stringent literacy and moral requirements. Once accepted by the CMTC corps area headquarters, applicants were encouraged to continue on to the intermediate (red) course only after they received an acceptable rating during the military training camps held during the summer. Once an applicant completed the required correspondence courses and graduated from the advanced (blue) course, he appeared before a board of Regular Army officers, at which point he had to take an examination on military tactics and military organization. Successful candidates received commissions into the U.S. Army Reserves.38

But as recruits soon learned, the process appeared more attractive on paper than in its application. From the moment the more than 250 black recruits from Washington, D.C., Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Maryland arrived at the Citizens’ Military Training Camp at Fort Howard, Maryland, they were put through the physical and mental rigors of military training. During the thirty-day training period, they received extensive physical examinations from army medical personnel. They were also given crew haircuts; were issued gray uniforms, serial numbers, and equipment; and lived in tents. Officers from the 428th Infantry Reserves put black youths through a strict regimen of calisthenics, regulation drill, inspections, roll calls, kitchen duty, and various organized activities, scheduling every minute of their leisure time. On the firing ranges and during elementary tactics held near the bivouac areas, the cadre appealed to the intestinal fortitude of the enrollees.39 As one young black enrollee noticed during his CMTC training, the “officers did not believe in half-stepping; cadets had to either come hard with it or not come at all.”40

More often than not, leadership at the CMTC mirrored the class-status structures that existed in African American society. The officers who were assigned to Fort Howard read like a who’s who of the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area. Among the camp officials were West Hamilton, a public school teacher and member of the city board of education, and Howard Queen, a Spring Garden Institute instructor.41 Also among the black elites who made up the officer corps was
Claude Ferebee, a Columbia University–trained dentist and future standout 93rd Division medical officer. Born in 1901 in Norfolk, Virginia, Ferebee had received his B.S. degree from Wilberforce University in 1923 before he established himself as a prominent physician in Washington, D.C., as well as a faculty member in Howard University’s School of Dentistry during the early 1930s. From 1932 to 1940, he opened and operated his own practice in the Northwest district while serving in the 428th’s dental reserve. Shortly afterward, Ferebee received orders to report to Fort Devens, Massachusetts, for training with the U.S. 366th Infantry before joining the 93rd Infantry Division in May 1942. A major proponent of racial solidarity, ethnic pride, and equality, Ferebee envisioned his service in the pre–World War II army as an extension of his services to the larger community. Describing his CMTC experience years later, he would articulate what many 428th reserve officers must have felt: “I had hoped to vindicate the cause to children and myself as well as to the profession which I represented and fostered.”

CMTC training was very popular among black youths in the Third and Ninth Corps areas. Most of the youths who attended the CMTC noticed the collective spirit that emanated throughout the camp. Particularly, the CMTC made a lasting impression upon teenagers like Benjamin Hunton. Born in 1919 in Washington, D.C.’s Northwest District, Hunton attended the CMTC after graduating from Dunbar High School in 1936. In the Citizens’ Military Training Camp held that summer, he witnessed not only numerous episodes of racial class division and paternalism among his superiors but also elements of racial solidarity and spiritual uplift. Furthermore, Hunton found the unbending discipline and the self-empowering presence of the camp cadre so much to his liking that he completed the CMTC requirements, earning commission in the U.S. Army Reserves in 1940, a year earlier than scheduled. After graduating that same year, Hunton continued his education at Howard University in pursuit of an M.A. degree until he was called to active duty in March 1942.

Others had more vivid memories of the camps. John Howard grew up in the Northeast District of Washington, D.C., where his father worked as Pullman baggage handler. After his father died, his mother continued to support him from her meager earnings as a domestic. In 1938, 15-year-old Howard attended the CMTC summer camp at the behest of Armstrong High School military science instructor Colonel Alonzo Ferguson, an officer in the 428th Infantry Reserves. The CMTC training and its similarity to army life so impressed Howard that he subsequently immersed himself in the correspondence courses, completing the requirements in 1940, more than two years earlier than army regulations allowed. After earning his commission a year later, he continued his education at Miner Teachers
College before being ordered to active duty in April 1942. CMTC summer camp allowed Howard “to fire heavy weapons such as the machine gun for the first time.” “The black lieutenants who commanded the units were so clean cut and highly respected that I realized right then that this [military life] was for me.”45 As one of the nearly two hundred CMTC participants at Fort Riley, Kansas, during the period, St. Louis, Missouri, resident Reuben Fraser expressed similar sentiments: “The officers at the CMTC Camp at Fort Riley, Kansas, were so admirable that it was then that I started to think about the military as a career.”46

Although not all the experiences of young CMTC participants were similar, the examples set by the all-black reserve officers who lived in their communities had a direct influence on the young men’s later World War II service. It was through these officers that young working-class black men from Washington’s Northwest District, the southern neighborhoods of Richmond, Virginia, and Philadelphia’s West Germantown first became acutely aware of the linkages between African American national and local community concerns in a military setting. Yet, at the same time, the class inequalities they experienced in civil society were being reproduced in the CMTC. Furthermore, as many young black CMTC enrollees tried to emulate the reserve officers, they also felt alienated from their own communities. While participating at the CMTC camp during the summer of 1938, Howard recalled visits from several Philadelphia Afro-American and Pittsburgh Courier journalists to Fort Howard. During their visits, the reporters interviewed the several reserve officers about the CMTC but never bothered to talk to the young enrollees about their experiences.47

The Army Reserve Officers’ Training Corps

As the storm clouds of war gathered in Europe, Africa, and Asia in 1939, programs such as the Reserve Officers’ Training Corps also shaped black youth activity and served as a forceful instrument for self-empowerment for many young African Americans. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, high school cadet detachments operated in high schools scattered throughout Chicago; Gary, Indiana; and Washington, D.C. In Washington, for instance, an average of 649 boys between the ages of 12 and 17 enrolled in Junior ROTC courses in Dunbar, Armstrong, and Benjamin Cardozo high schools alone.48 There they received instruction in close-order drill, playing brass instruments, physical exercises, map reading, tactical problems, and first aid. Once a year, members of the high school cadet corps attended a two-week camp where they put into practice what they learned in the classroom under the scrutiny of officers from the U.S. 428th In-
fantry Reserves and the National Guard on days that normally ran from 5 a.m. until 9 p.m.

As in the CMTC, business and professional people dominated the instructorships in the Junior ROTC, reflecting a collapsing of civilian and military discipline. For example, high school military instructors like Alonzo Ferguson and Vance Marchbanks convinced young Washington, D.C., students that they received tangible benefits from military training. From 1919 to 1940, Ferguson, a career 428th Infantry reserve officer, had trained his students in the nuances of military science, emphasizing ethnic pride and individual responsibility. In the classroom and at summer bivouac sites, he appealed to Armstrong cadets to “strive to maintain the highest standards no matter what the adversity.” Such encouragement struck a chord among young blacks in the ranks. By early February 1942, Ferguson would witness the nearly two hundred of his former students who were called to active duty emerge as the key platoon leaders in the major combat units of World War II.49

Dunbar High School cadets received similar instruction in military science from Captain Marchbanks, a career army officer of thirty-nine years. Marchbanks was major advocate of the Washingtonian principles of citizenship, hard work, and racial solidarity. He wrote to the NAACP in 1934 that military training provided the essential key to the final attainment of social and political equality by African Americans: “You and I know that the Negro needs training in citizenship and that is what he gets in the army.” “We cannot hope to get economic, political, and social justice in civic affairs unless we are willing to accept responsibility in the scheme of our national defense.”50 Although one cannot determine whether this was a true patriotic impulse or political posturing, such views made an indelible impression upon future 93rd veterans. In the words of one former Armstrong High School cadet, “These men, more than anyone else, greatly influenced our direction early in our lives.”51

But as the 1930s drew to a close, African American involvement in military organizations was not just restricted to Junior ROTC units. Many young black men who later served in the U.S. 93rd Infantry Division were enrolled in regular ROTC units at Lincoln University in Missouri, Wilberforce University in Ohio, and Howard University in Washington, D.C. As freshmen and sophomores, they were required to receive up to three hours a week of instruction as a prerequisite for graduation. Only one of these institutions, Howard University’s ROTC, had somewhat steady enrollments, however. In 1927, at the height of the Reserve Officers’ Training Corps movement, the Howard University ROTC detachment attracted an average of 359 and 34 cadets in its basic and advanced courses, respectively.52
By 1938, budgetary cutbacks and decreasing student enrollments at Howard University led to a 20 percent decline in the average number of basic course cadets. Yet an interest in military careers continued to grow among black youth throughout the late 1930s. Although the average number of basic course students in the Howard University ROTC program decreased, the average class enrollment of cadets selected for the advanced course increased to forty-one annually.\(^53\) Meanwhile, the late 1930s witnessed a flurry of activity at black educational institutions that did not have ROTC programs as attempts were made to establish military detachments. In March 1937, John W. Davis waged a campaign to persuade West Virginia senator M. M. Neely to support West Virginia State College’s bid for an ROTC unit. This movement resulted in a congressional resolution creating an organization less than a year later.\(^54\)

In 1938 and throughout most of 1939, ROTC instructors placed a great deal of emphasis upon cultivating a complex sense of race and national loyalty among the cadet corps. In black ROTC detachments at Howard University, for example, cadets received government-issued gray uniforms and formed a battalion consisting of four companies. During the autumn and winter quarters of 1938 and 1939, an average of fifty-one cadets spent twenty hours a week attending lectures given by former reserve sergeants and warrant officers on African American history, military theory, and “citizenship” and performing variations of regulation drill. As winter faded into the spring of 1939, cadets received all their instruction from class-elected cadet captains who put them through the paces of physical exercises and military training.\(^55\)

Like other military programs described above, the main focus of the Reserve Officers’ Training Corps was military camps. At summer camps held at Camp Meade, Maryland, in 1940, selected ROTC members received instruction in firing various types of weapons, tactical warfare problems, and close-order drill while living in conditions that closely resembled those that existed in the Regular Army. Under the tight reign of Colonel Charles E. Howard, cadets observed the military oath, received crew haircuts, and endured endless bouts of physical and emotional stress. Camp officers, who were selected from among the cadets, supervised various group competitions and company punishments in order to force individuals to place the well-being of their companies above their own. The small coterie of officers selected to oversee camp operations during the summer of 1938 was an unusual group of individuals who inspired the corps of cadets by offering self-styled renditions of “John Brown’s Body” and employing colorful language to exhort their fellow members to unprecedented levels of racial unity, manhood, and physical strength. After one exhausting afternoon of tactical training,
17-year-old Walter Sanderson, a Washington, D.C., resident recalled, “I heard some of our company members complain that they were not going to make it, but I pleaded with them that race men don’t quit and called them Goldbricks to their faces.” “Somehow, damn it, they all made it.” The son of a schoolteacher and a career police officer, Sanderson had initially entered the Howard University ROTC in 1939 with great deal of apprehension. But the officer training camp that summer had changed all that; by June 1941, he soon graduated from Howard University with a B.S. degree in mathematics while simultaneously earning a certificate of commission into the 428th Infantry Reserves. Shortly afterward, Sanderson worked for a Washington, D.C., post office before being called to active duty in 1943.

Another young man who held an ROTC leadership position that summer and who hoped to gain a U.S. Army Reserve commission was Washington, D.C., resident Vincent Browne. Born in 1917, Browne entered the Howard University ROTC program to fulfill a lifelong dream of being in the military and at the same time pursued a degree in government under the tutelage of noted political scientist Ralph Bunche. After earning a commission in 1940, Browne worked as research assistant for the Carnegie Corporation in New York before heading to Harvard University. There he continued his studies until he was called to active duty in March 1942. "I was always interested in military things," Browne recalled. "Howard ROTC enabled me to win a commission after I was unable to gain entrance into West Point.”

Browne’s interest in the military, however, was also accompanied by a stronger sense of racial and class unity. In August 1940 Browne had penned an article in which he linked Jewish struggles against the Hitlerian threat in Europe and the Chinese rejection of Japan’s call for a “New World Order” in Asia to the African American struggle for equality at home. He excoriated “the smug complacency of the Negro intelligentsia and the ‘high-brows’ of Negro society” and pointed out that “a heterogeneous state is most vulnerable to the vitriolic attacks of racial theorists if one of its groups lives in a state of social ostracism and economic depression.” “The defense of a race against tactics of race hatred at home cannot be estimated in terms of guns and other instruments of warfare, for great issues are seldom settled on the battlefield . . . we must have a type of unity which has never been known before.”

In the months that followed, young black men like Vincent Browne had come to realize that their people’s struggles had taken on an international dimension. The very nature of the Great Depression years of the 1930s forced African American youth to see the new decade through lenses tinged with multiple layers of
consciousness. And as German troops proceeded to launch their assault on Europe with lightning force in 1940 and Americans looked on from afar, the attitudes of young black men toward military life were rooted in neither patriotism nor civic duty but were instead deeply enveloped in their efforts to scale the racial and class boundaries that had long existed in the country. So as the prospects of American involvement in the European conflict drew near, young African Americans found themselves standing face to face with ambivalent War Department policymakers who needed their participation in the war effort but questioned their fitness for duty and the communities that nurtured their worldviews. Indeed, the stage upon which the wartime encounters between these groups would take place was now set.