For black GIs who served in division-size units within the segregated army elsewhere during World War II, the distorted information provided by rumor often carried deep racial overtones. For example, groups of men from the all-black U.S. 92nd Infantry Division disembarked in Naples, Italy, in August 1944 after spending nearly two and a half years training in Alabama, Kentucky, Indiana, and Arizona. Three regiments and an assortment of special combat teams, tank destroyers, and field artillery battalions of the 92nd Division participated in the Arno River seizing and crossing as the 5th Army advanced toward the Gothic Line of the northern Apennines while attached to the 4th Corps’s 1st Armored Division. While in the area, its regimental combat teams successfully engaged German forces, extending the front more than 20 miles. However, the conduct of some of the troops on the battlefield attracted controversy. During the fall of 1944, an element of the 92nd Infantry Division sustained heavy casualties when it encountered fierce enemy fire in its attempt to gain and hold Mount Cauala. By the time the unit left Italy, the officers and enlisted men with the division were reorganized and reassigned, with many of them subjected to summary court-martial trials and reductions in rank. To make matters worse, vicious rumors about their conduct under fire circulated widely throughout the European theater, even reaching the Senate floor. Terms like “mass hysteria,” “lack of pride of accomplishment,” and “melting away” filled the numerous reports filed by army officers and observers blaming the difficulties of the division on its black officers and enlisted personnel.

But many black soldiers with the division and black reporters covering the division contested the negative judgments of their performance in the field of battle. As one former black officer with the unit recalled years later, “The Ninety-second Division was permitted (or caused) to fail in certain combat operations; and those failures were documented for the specific purpose of discrediting blacks as efficient officers and combat soldiers. Therefore, the Army used the division as a convenient scapegoat to maintain the status quo in the military establishment and in society.”

This was also the case for the men who served with the 93rd Infantry Division in the Pacific war. The unit, it was suggested over and over again, was a poor infantry organization commanded by inefficient black junior officers, but it was better than average in housekeeping duties. For example, while touring various areas of the Southwest Pacific during February of the following year, a public relations officer in a forward area told NAACP executive secretary Walter White that the 93rd Infantry Division, which had been assigned to beachhead in Bougainville, had broken under fire and run, causing a large number of white officers and enlisted men to lose their lives. Some of the rumors were even circulated by 93rd
Division officers themselves. During the fall of 1944, 93rd Division chief of staff Stanley Prouty, who had just returned from the South Pacific theater, met with John J. McCloy and told him that the 93rd Division had failed to take a beachhead at Bougainville Island. A month later, Southwest Pacific theater commander Douglas MacArthur quoted Griswold's assessment of the 93rd, rating the work of the division's infantrymen as poor, the performance of the artillerymen as good, and its vehicle maintenance “of high order.” “The general level of leadership was poor, particularly in the companies and platoons,” MacArthur stated. Around the same time, 8th Army commander Robert Eichelberger inspected the men in the 93rd Division and claimed, “I have never seen so much snap in my life. They had every vehicle polished, the engines were cleaned up fine, and every colored boy saluted as far as he could see you.”

To make matters worse, the disparaging view of the unit reached the Roosevelt White House. After receiving news about the performance of the 25th Infantry in May 1944 from Undersecretary of War John McCloy, Henry Stimson observed, “I do not believe they can be turned into really effective combat troops without all officers being white. This is indicated by many of the incidents herein.” By the end of the war, the racist misperceptions regarding the actions of the men in K Company had reached such a level that army chief of staff George Marshall echoed Stimson’s view that the 25th Infantry’s performance “is a very clear demonstration of the unreliability of Negro troops unless they are at least supported by white commissioned and non-commissioned officers.” Four years later, he told a reporter, “The men of the Ninety-third wouldn’t fight . . . , couldn’t get them out of the caves to fight.” Although Marshall should have known better than to have made such an erroneous statement, the fact that he and Stimson held such strong viewpoints illustrated the readiness on the part of some War Department officials to use the flimsy evidence collected by 14th Corps investigators both to denigrate the fighting abilities of black soldiers and to demonstrate white supremacy.

But not every senior official in Washington accepted Griswold’s negative view of the 25th Infantry’s performance. Upon learning of the 25th Infantry’s action under fire at Bougainville, John McCloy stated: “Although they show some important limitations, on the whole I feel that the report is not so bad as to discourage us. The general tone of these reports reminds me of the first reports we got of the 99th Squadron. You remember that they were not very good, but that the Squadron has now taken its place in the line and has performed very well. It will take more time and effort to make good combat units out of them, but in the end, I think they can be brought over to the asset side.”
Around the same time, as the speculation surrounding the ordeal of K Company began to heat up, black 93rd servicemen and sectors of the black community worked to counter the distorted information relating to their conduct on the field of battle. Largely revolving around a discourse of racial democracy and home, formal and informal networks of communication sprang forward in order to challenge the biased accounts and to serve as reservoirs of resistance. Throughout the spring months of 1944, the Cleveland Call & Post, the Baltimore Afro-American, the Pittsburgh Courier, the Chicago Defender, and the Chicago Bee were filled with front-page stories filed by war correspondents and soldiers alike about black courage and heroism in the Pacific. Banner headlines such as “93rd Pushes On in Drive against Japs” and “93rd in South Pacific” hailed the activities of division members at every turn.129

And the informal communication networks forged between division members and correspondents circulated news about other black units in the Pacific as well as for loved ones at home. Of his coverage of the 93rd Division’s activities in the Pacific, for instance, Chicago Defender correspondent Enoch Waters remembered, “My job was quite simple. I followed the same procedure as the unit moved from each island, getting the names and hometowns of as many men as possible who were engaged in different types of assignments. Interestingly, many of the men were as hungry for the news of the Pacific War as the people back home. And I tried to answer the questions that I thought were in the minds of people back home for every black family was concerned about the fate of its young men in the military. I believed their primary concern was not how the war was progressing but how the GIs were doing.”130

But nowhere were these formal and informal networks of communication made more evident than in the campaign waged by NAACP national secretary Walter White to draw the attention of federal authorities and African American society to the army’s employment of the division in the Pacific. In the early months of 1945, White was traveling extensively throughout the region visiting black GIs on the battlefield when he heard rumors regarding K Company’s difficulties on Bougainville Island and countless stories from black press correspondents that the 93rd Division had been reconstituted for labor duties.131 Inquiring further into the matter, White appeared at the 93rd Division headquarters at Hollandia, Dutch New Guinea, where he heard reports given by Brigadier General Leonard Boyd, 368th Infantry commander James Urquhart, 318th Medical Battalion commander
Robert Bennett, and other officers of the unit’s activities on Bougainville. Boyd told White that “the story was a lie out of the whole cloth” and explained to him that the Bougainville assault had been made and the defensive perimeter established four months prior to the arrival of the 25th Regimental Combat Team. According to the division brigade commander, “The Twenty-fifth Infantry had accomplished its mission in a manner that was commendable for a veteran outfit, outstanding for a unit in its first combat action.” And White heard other officers claim that the 93rd Division had performed the very limited combat duties assigned to the unit in a creditable fashion and that the stories that surrounded the division’s participation in the taking of a beachhead on the island were absolutely false. Several officers in the U.S. 37th Division who witnessed the 25th Infantry in action echoed the observations of Boyd and other division cadres and told the NAACP secretary that the unit “conducted itself well at Bougainville.”

After learning the events surrounding the reported Company K episode, however, White met with several 93rd Division GIs, who informed him that Harry H. Johnson, the newly appointed division commander, had greatly bolstered the unit’s morale by relieving incompetent white officers and those who attempted to use their affiliation with the division to obtain promotions and transfers out of the unit. But White also learned, to his dismay, that many of the unit’s capable and fair-minded West Point–educated officers, such as Arthur Amos, George Coleman, Carl McFerren, and Federick Bendtson, had been transferred out of the division to the Americal Division. The soldiers then went on to express their resentment over the transferring of black officers out of the division who disagreed with unit policies regarding promotion and assignment, and they conveyed their fears that the division would be converted into service units similar to those that had replaced the 2nd Cavalry Division in North Africa.

Hoping to focus the War Department’s attention on what he perceived as a demoralizing situation for the division troops, White adopted the cause as his own and dispatched a detailed report of the unit’s travails to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt on 12 February 1945. Protesting against the unit’s unloading ships and rudimentary drilling during the past nine months, White recommended that the division be reconstituted as an integral unit, relieved of its garrison duties, and retrained for front-line action. The NAACP secretary also demanded that the War Department bring to an end its assignment of reclassified white and black officers to the division, the transferring of all white officers out of the unit who objected to serving with black troops, and the placement of black officers in the division headquarters. Finally, White demanded that the army investigate Southwest Pacific theater commander Douglas MacArthur’s policies regarding black
troops, noting, “Statements have been made to me by responsible persons that MacArthur is at least partly responsible for the failure to train properly and utilize the Ninety-third Division in combat.” White’s suspicion of the lack of action taken by MacArthur and high-ranking members within the Southwest Pacific command may have been heightened by the fact that when he requested an interview with the general regarding the use of black troops in his theater of operations, he was denied a meeting on several occasions on the grounds that the general was in the midst of planning the recapture of the Philippine Islands.\(^\text{132}\)

Yet when asked by the War Department two weeks later to respond to White’s accusations of a deliberate campaign to disparage the 93rd’s front-line activities and the Southwest Pacific’s inefficient employment policies regarding the unit, MacArthur presented another view. The Southwest Pacific commander referred to the comments made by the 14th Corps about the unit’s performance seven months earlier as a way of justifying the duties he assigned to the division. “The First Cavalry, Seventh, Seventy-Seventh, Forty-First and Thirty-Eighth Divisions were all superior to the Ninety-Third except in the matter of motor maintenance,” MacArthur claimed. With regard to White’s argument that the 93rd had been broken up, he contended that few divisions within the Southwest Pacific area sustained their initial makeup. According to MacArthur, the 93rd Division’s duties in the Southwest Pacific theater centered upon holding the defensive perimeters of occupied areas, performing labor details in port areas, and training for combat patrols. With this, he informed the War Department that the division had been alerted for movement from Hollandia, New Guinea, to Morotai, where it would be employed against enemy forces in the area. Referring to the assignment and transfer of white officers both in and outside the division, the Southwest Pacific theater commander also argued that while every unit assigned to the area found itself compelled to follow this policy because of the limited number of replacements, many of the 93rd Infantry Division’s capable field-grade officers had been requested by other units. On White’s claims of racial discrimination toward the unit, MacArthur finally remarked, “The violent opinions and unfounded statements of Mister White would seem to mark him as a troublemaker and a menace to the war effort.”\(^\text{133}\)

The Southwest Pacific area commander, nevertheless, recognized the adverse publicity surrounding his handling of black troops in his theater of operations and agreed to meet with the NAACP executive secretary to discuss the 93rd at the division headquarters at Hollandia in early March 1945. During their high-profile meetings, MacArthur repeated his claim that “race had nothing whatsoever to do with the Ninety-third’s ability to fight.” Recalling his service as a junior officer
who commanded Filipino troops decades earlier, the general argued, “Any man who says that another man's fighting ability can be measured by color is wrong.” MacArthur based his reasoning for not utilizing the division on the lack of shipping and his inspectors' reports on the division advising him that the unit's morale was low.  

MacArthur’s remarks seem to have allayed White's apprehensions somewhat because after learning that the 93rd had been reassigned to Morotai, the NAACP secretary wrote the general less than a week later. “You certainly acted promptly after our talk of March 1. Your action in bringing the division together in one island for the first time since the Ninety-third left the States will undoubtedly have immediate effect in improvement of efficiency and a sense of unity.” What White failed to realize at the time, however, was that MacArthur had no intentions of employing the division in front-line duty and had planned to use the unit only as rear-echelon forces in his plans to reenter the Philippine Islands. In fact, according to the plans of 26 February adopted by Southwest Pacific theater commander, the 93rd would perform “garrison duties on occupied islands and on Morotai” and would be used only in the later stages of the operation as mopping up forces.  

MacArthur’s encounters with the NAACP executive secretary and his attitudes toward black soldiers in the military may have been as paradoxical as the responses among 93rd Division members to their overseas experiences. For example, division officer Francis Ellis, a native of Chandler, Oklahoma, who was present during the general's meetings with the NAACP executive secretary, described an incident that occurred on the last day:  

When Walter White came to Hollandia, Dutch New Guinea, after the Pittsburgh Courier and the Baltimore Afro-American made a lot of noise about the 93rd being changed over from infantry troops to labor troops, General MacArthur wondered why this white man was so concerned about black troops. On the last day when the general, White, and their aides were ending their discussions and were bidding each other good-bye, MacArthur asked him why he was so interested in these niggers anyway. When White told him that he too was black, the general turned and left the division headquarters without saying another word.  

White's efforts, however, also had their limits, as not all black 93rd GIs favored the stance that he taken on their behalf. No sooner had the NAACP leader arrived stateside than he received a letter from sixteen division servicemen withdrawing their membership and criticizing the organization's efforts to redeploy them to front-line duty:
Your organization has failed to confine your work to the home front. This was substantiated by a recent visit to our organization by one of your representatives. The only person that he contacted was an officer, whose name cannot be mention [sic] hereon for various reasons. The only thing that he seems to be interested in, was the engaging of our organization in more combat. He didn’t bother to ask nor inquire why we have been overseas for approximately fifteen months and haven’t seen nor been near any signs of civilization for recreational purposes or otherwise. Personally, we feel that he didn’t give a darn as he hasn’t experienced the separation as we have from our loved ones. In other words, take care of the home front, we’ll handle things from this end.  

And still other GIs with the unit expressed a jaded view altogether of the war correspondents who covered their activities. Specifically, although many division members felt that the correspondents had worked diligently to circulate news of their contributions to the war effort, they sometimes resented their zealous efforts to cast them as symbols in the struggle for equality. The tension between black journalists and troops serving on the battlefield manifested at many levels. While traveling with the division throughout the Solomon Islands in 1944, Chicago Defender correspondent Enoch Waters was approached by several angry GIs and roundly criticized. Waving a clipping taken from the Defender that clamored for their deployment to battle, the soldiers told Waters, “I don’t know whom you folks think you’re speaking for, but it certainly ain’t us. You folks are sitting back at home and too old or too beat up to be drafted. It’s easy to say let them fight and die.” When the Defender correspondent reiterated the position taken by the press and the NAACP that their placement in combat units served as an indication of fairer treatment in the army, GIs jeered him derisively and asked, “Why should we volunteer to sacrifice our lives for a Jim Crow country?” In a similar vein, when asked by a member of Howard University’s administration to reflect on his wartime experiences, officer George Leighton wrote home from the Pacific during the period: “I can tell you that here among our troops the average colored soldier is becoming more and more disgusted with the pitifully asinine reports that are printed each week in the Afro-American, the Pittsburgh Courier, and the Chicago Defender. Not only are those articles inaccurate. They go so far as to print blatant falsehoods that make the colored troops the laughing stock of the white soldiers who know the true facts.”

Little did Leighton and other black 93rd GIs realize it at the time, but many service dependents and friends had reached a similar conclusion. After receiving word of her husband’s passing, Ollive Davenport was putting her life back together
and caring for her daughter Patricia Ann when she was invited to Fort Huachuca to accept her husband’s Bronze Star as a tribute to his self-sacrificing deeds in the Bougainville campaign. Although no record survives of what she said on the day of the ceremony, in its coverage of the event, the *California Eagle* published photographs of the Tucson, Arizona, resident standing proud and resolute before members of the post high command.¹⁴¹ But *Eagle* correspondents failed to realize that with her attendance at the ceremony and the countless statements made by service family members and friends around the same time, Ollive Davenport and other service relatives had emerged as the chief custodians of the physical and emotional well-being of their loved ones in uniform. And in the process, they became important leaders in efforts to effect social and political change on a number of levels. For army planners, government officials, and black leaders and institutions, their voices in support of black servicemen would rumble loudly, resonating across the country as well as throughout the Southwest Pacific theater.
Relative Security in the Southwest Pacific

Perhaps nothing perplexes the outside observer more than the popular term and the popular theory of “social equality.” The term is kept vague and elusive and the theory loose and ambiguous. One moment it will be stretched to cover and justify every form of social segregation and discrimination. The next moment it will be narrowed to express only the denial of close personal intimacies and intermarriage. The very lack of precision allows the notion to rationalize the rather illogical and wavering system of color caste in America.

Gunnar Myrdal, 1944

“I am writing about a matter concerning my brother, Sergeant Samuel Hill,” began Grace Davis in a letter written to the judge advocate general in November 1945. On the surface, Davis’s missive appears to be quite simple: a letter expressing concern for the physical well-being of a service family member in time of war. But the nature of Davis’s inquiry and the sequence of events that it referenced carried a political subtext. On 9 January 1945, while serving with an echelon of the U.S. 93rd Infantry Division, Samuel Hill and one other soldier were arrested and charged with raping a Papuan woman in the Netherlands East Indies. Despite conflicting testimony rendered by prosecution witnesses during the court-martial proceedings, members of the hearing board dismissed the charges against the other GI. The 28-year-old Detroit, Michigan, resident was found guilty, however, and faced a penalty of being dishonorably discharged and the forfeiture of his benefits in addition to serving a lifetime of hard labor. Shortly afterward, Hill was transferred to the United States and confined to the U.S. Penitentiary in Washington State.
Given the relationship that existed between black GIs and the American military justice system in the early twentieth century, the swiftness of the legal process should not be surprising. As recent scholars have noted, disproportionate numbers of African American soldiers in the European and Pacific theaters of operations had been tried and executed for such capital crimes prior to and during the Second World War. However, Samuel Hill’s case and its immediate aftermath are significant for several reasons. First, the case highlighted the degree to which the army’s relationship with black GIs in an international setting intersected with American domestic racial and sexual politics. By the time the division stepped ashore at Dutch New Guinea in the fall of 1944, the army’s employment of African Americans in the Pacific had been reconfigured to encompass notions of patriarchy and white male privilege. While dispersed throughout the Pacific, black division members faced overwhelming obstacles, working as service and support troops loading and discharging ships and providing local security for radar installations while drawing enemy fire. Southwest Pacific theater commanders also drew upon sexualized racial stereotypes of African American men as rapists to justify policies limiting the social interaction between black GIs and indigenous populations in the area. In addition, in the weeks following the Japanese surrender, most African American service personnel experienced tremendous difficulties in securing passage home owing to a demobilization system that favored front-line troops.

The case reflected the bold leadership of African American grassroots institutions that rallied to the cause of black 93rd GIs. Within weeks after news of Hill’s trial reached the United States, for instance, service relatives like Grace Davis sprang into action, firing off numerous telegrams and letters of protest to military officials, the White House, and congressional leaders, as well as to high officials within the NAACP. In the process, the drama surrounding Hill’s case graced the front pages of newspapers around the world and unveiled the sexual dimensions of the army’s racial politics for all to see. Indeed, by the time Samuel Hill had arrived in Washington to begin his laboring ordeal, the edifice of race and sex would provide a stage upon which the contradictions of American domestic reality and wartime rhetoric would be showcased.

**Discipline in the Southwest Pacific**

As the summer faded into the fall of 1944, the Bougainville campaign had drawn to a close, and the battle-tested echelons of the 93rd Infantry Division began to make their way northwestward toward the southern Philippine Islands. After boarding transports at Empress Augusta Bay, the division’s regimental combat teams
and headquarters company arrived at the Green and Russell Islands group, where they established base security against enemy attack while undergoing refresher training programs. At the same time, men of 368th Infantry’s 2nd Battalion moved from the Russells to Vella Lavella in the New Georgia group, where they continued to perform labor details unloading ships at the port while providing security patrols on the island. Among those who participated in the intensive operations were Raymond Jenkins of Memphis; Randall Morgan of Chicago; Edgar Davis of Montclair, New Jersey; Malcolm Brown of Seattle; Julius Thompson of Norfolk, Virginia; and William “Billy” Kyle of Philadelphia. There they remained until the unit was ordered to accompany the remainder of the regiment to nearby Munda before heading to Morotai Island in April 1945.6

Other contingents of the division seem to have had the same duties as the 368th Infantry’s 2nd Battalion. Members of the 369th Infantry Regiment assumed command of the Emirau Island after arriving from Guadalcanal during the late summer months of 1944. Encountering very little opposition, the troops bolstered the island’s defenses while undergoing a strict regimen of combat training. From Munda to the Finschafen to the St. Mathias Islands group, African American servicemen with the 93rd spent endless days loading and unloading supplies at ports while providing island and base security.

The division’s defensive preparations were part and parcel of a larger Allied Pacific drive in the making. To the northwest of the New Guinea and Bismarck Archipelago, where most of the division’s units were concentrated, lay the coastal islands of Wakde and Biak, two prime airfield sites that the Southwest Pacific headquarters hoped to secure for future Allied bomber operations in the Philippines. According to historian Ronald Spector, “An added incentive to these plans was the fear that these fine airfield sites might soon be utilized by the Japanese in a counterattack unless the Allies moved quickly.”7 In a similar fashion, the Dutch New Guinea anchorage and other bases in the region were to serve as strategic supply points and staging areas from which to launch a concerted land-based aircraft attack on Japanese forces between New Guinea and Mindanao. The patrolling operations performed by the 93rd Infantry Division and other units in the Hollandia region were important because refortification of the vital airfields by the enemy would create a setback in the Allied plan to advance into the Philippines and beyond.8

But as the soldiers advanced from island to island, few failed to notice the precarious predicament of black servicemen in the Southwest Pacific theater. Albert Evans, a soldier in the 369th Infantry, recalled, “Upon leaving Munda our battal-
ion was sent to the Admiralties. This is where we were used as stevedores completely.” At the same time, Julius Young, a former resident of Wilmington, Delaware, also experienced the situation firsthand when he received an order from the division headquarters to evacuate an airstrip on New Guinea. Young recalled, “I told General Eichelberger’s adjutant general that this must be a mistake to send me down here to do this because I don’t know how to do this. But when he radioed back to division headquarters, they told him that I was the man.” Undaunted, Young and his men worked day and night until they completed the task—seven days earlier than scheduled. For his distinguished performance, the young lieutenant received a commendation from 8th Army headquarters but failed to receive the Bronze Star because of a statement he had made criticizing the army’s deployment policies. Describing the division’s activities during the period, Claude Ferebee told a contemporary, “We are no longer under the Army you were acquainted with or mentioned. Just like a one-horse freight train—always side tracked. We are and have been as I used the term in a discussion the other day: racial prisoners of war.” And as Edward Souls, a soldier assigned to the unit, put it, “We struck our blows against the enemy by throwing, stacking, unstacking, loading and unloading supplies in warehouses. The black officers and troops began to accept their fate, knowing full well that “Mac” (MacArthur) had no intention of giving our outfit a crack at the big time. Not only that, but even if you wanted to go home and you had enough points, you were stuck.”

What Claude Ferebee, Edward Souls, and other 93rd GIs failed to realize, however, was that the army’s deployment policies had much more to do with the logistical problems that the Southwest Pacific area was experiencing at the time than anything else. From the fall of 1944 well into the spring and summer of 1945, the excessive retention and slow turnaround of ships and the shortage of service troops in the theater had greatly hampered the lines of communication, supplies, and equipment required for the day-to-day operations of divisions and supporting troops bound for duty in the Philippines. Because the Southwest Pacific area commander had habitually used ships in his theater as floating warehouses, the number of ships retained in the Southwest Pacific rose from seventy-one in January 1944 to well over two hundred eleven months later. Conversely, the ratio of combat to service troops in the Southwest Pacific area was nine to one. As a result, the American invasion of Luzon slated for December 1944 year was not launched until mid-January 1945.

In an attempt to alleviate the logistical situation, army chief of staff George Marshall ordered MacArthur to reduce the number of ships retained in his theater
to under a hundred by mid-January. Furthermore, Marshall tried to get MacArthur to close down some of his rear bases in the theater and demanded that the commander adjust the number of operations he planned to undertake based on the shipping already available in his area. “Our global commitments cannot sustain this extraordinary tax against shipping effectiveness. Your future operations and those in other theaters are already penalized by shipping shortages,” Marshall warned, but to no avail. In February 1945, the War Department reported that of the 446 vessels within the theater, 102 were idle, waiting to load or discharge, 62 were docked for repairs, and 165 were setting sail for forwarding ports. By the time the first echelon of the 93rd, along with the 25th, 37th, 40th, 43rd, and American divisions, arrived in the Southwest Pacific area, at least 33 of the 86 non-combatant ships anchored in the Hollandia harbor needed unloading, with 33 held awaiting discharge and 24 others awaiting deployment to Leyte. Indeed, by the time soldiers of the 93rd Division arrived in the area, the service troop and shipping crisis that had been brewing for nearly two years in the Pacific had become an urgent issue.

Back-Channel Strategies of Resistance

While stationed on the nearby Treasury Islands, thirty-three black officers, including Walter Greene, Lorenzo Blount, Julian Dawson, George Looney, and Edward Strawther, received refresher courses in officer basic training during the summer and fall months of 1944. Where the reorientation course stood in the priorities of the Southwest Pacific campaign is unclear, but the purpose of the instruction remains vivid in the memory of the officers who participated in it. Once the junior officers arrived at the training facility, they realized that the return of their units to the fighting fronts of the Pacific War was not part of their superiors’ plan. Charles Lynn, a native of Peoria, Illinois, and other members of the 25th Infantry Regiment had no sooner arrived on Green Island from combat operations on Bougainville that September than he received word that he had been assigned to Stirling Island to attend a special school for division officers. When Lynn and fifteen other junior officers arrived at the isolated military outpost, they encountered endless roll calls, calisthenics sessions, and command and control problems. As Lynn recalled, “There we were to prove our efficiency and better our attitudes or be reclassified.” Shortly afterward, Lynn boarded a plane that took him to Ora Bay, New Guinea, where he stood before members of a reclassification board and was promptly discharged from the army “for conditions other than honorable.”
For Walter Greene, a fellow 25th Infantry officer from Detroit, the retraining of black officers in the division had more to do with their standing in the army than with deficiencies exhibited on the field of battle. “The black enlisted man did not get this kind of pressure from white officers,” Greene remembers. “As a matter of fact, he could be almost decent to the dog-foot soldier, but their hostility to the black officer bordered on paranoia. A black man as their peer they could not stand and they did their damnedest to break you through humiliation and frustration.” He recalled that his troubles with his superior officers at the officer retraining facility began when he discovered that the school was operating outside the purview of the War Department—and thus illegally. “To keep it hidden from Washington, the general did not maintain a morning report. We were being carried on the morning reports of the outfits to which we belonged, like all was well.”

When Greene realized that he could not be court-martialed for refusing direct orders at the school, he and eight other officers refused to report to formation and ignored commands to return to their previous units. By the time word of their resistive acts reached the division headquarters and before a course of disciplinary action could be carried out against them, the school ceased operations, and he and the other black officers who remained at the camp received orders transferring them to the Molucca Islands, near Morotai. Throughout the process, Greene and his fellow GIs remained undaunted. While awaiting transfer, the 25-year-old GI and other soldiers wrote letters to loved ones and friends in an attempt to draw national attention to their travails in the Southwest Pacific.

While undergoing the officer retraining program, Julian Dawson and a group of officers also penned several round-robin letters to family members and associates, informing them of the daily indignities they encountered at the hands of the senior division staff officers charged with running the facility. “We are catching hell,” the soldiers wrote, but their efforts produced little results. Much of the correspondence never made it out of the Southwest Pacific area. And for Julian Dawson, the son of a well-known surgeon, his problems were only just beginning. Within months after he was discharged from the army for “conduct unbecoming an officer,” the Chicago resident returned home only to receive a letter from his local draft board, ordering him to report for reinduction as a private.

Throughout World War II, army intelligence personnel tended to scan such powerfully written letters by black GIs for sensitive information relating to battlefront conditions in the Southwest Pacific. Most of the time they dismissed the exchanges as typical complaints of army life in rear echelon areas. Indeed, as Samuel Stouffer and other members of the Research Branch of the army during the period and recent scholars have attested, vast numbers of soldiers spent their leisure time
writing such letters during World War II.21 Black GIs were no exception. As students of the African American experience in the war have also recently documented, however, army censors often screened black soldiers’ letters for derogatory comments relating to their treatment in the segregated army.22 In the Southwest Pacific theater, censors engaged in a concerted effort to deflect public criticism away from the army’s treatment of black troops. For military intelligence officials in the 14th Corps, the slightest reference to racial injustice in black soldiers’ letters raised fears of the detrimental consequences that soldiers’ discontent with racial conditions would have for Allied forces waging war in the Pacific.23

During the month of September 1944 alone, base authorities sifted through approximately two million pieces of mail, from which they extracted large amounts of correspondence by military personnel citing the state of race relations in the army. “Many of these comments are written by colored troops,” one base censor wrote at the time. “And the majority of them are expressions of discontent with existing conditions.”24 As the division headquarters assumed control of base operations on islands scattered throughout the theater, the commanding general of the 93rd Infantry Division worked tirelessly to suppress outgoing material relating to racial attitudes within the unit, often instructing base censors to sanitize or detain all correspondence that contained derogatory statements.25

Around the same time, counterintelligence and S-2 officers also lectured division personnel endlessly about the need to abstain from divulging to their loved ones details about their situation overseas that might jeopardize security.26 And as if this were not enough, G-2 officials cracked down on what they considered to be breaches of vital military security, meting out heavy fines and punitive measures against those soldiers who violated censorship regulations. Unsurprisingly, such stringent measures clashed with the perceptions of many black GIs attached to the unit, as they perceived the regulations as yet another weapon in the arsenal of military racism. For instance, like so many other servicemen stationed overseas at the time, a black GI from Minneapolis experienced the sanctioning power of the division’s intelligence apparatus firsthand. During the period, he wrote a letter to his mother railing against the indignities that he and other soldiers encountered while serving in the area and announcing his intention to desert the army. A few days after base censors intercepted his letter, both he and his mother were visited by G-2 staff officers. The former soldier explained, “You have to remember that such repression was necessary in their eyes because they [army officials] wanted to make sure that ideas like those that I was expressing didn’t get out to the public.”27
However, many letters containing incisive commentary on the treatment of blacks both abroad and at home escaped the attention of army officials. Hoping to get their letters past the censor and avoid official persecution, black 93rd GIs and loved ones at home described race relations in the army as well as in society at large using coded language that seemed virtually indecipherable to army counterintelligence officers. Employing various neighborhood and household-specific symbols and cues, public and private correspondence often carried cryptic messages that could only be interpreted as ironic expressions of everyday life in the face of power. As his unit moved from Bougainville to Green Island in October 1944, for instance, Cleveland resident Thomas White wrote a letter to his wife in which he included a short poem titled “Somewhere in the South Pacific” that parodied the vicissitudes of black life at the front:

Somewhere in the South Pacific where the sun is like a curse,  
And each long day is followed by Another . . . slightly worse  
And the men dream and wish for greener, fairer lands.

Somewhere in the South Pacific where a girl is never seen,  
Where the sky is never cloudy and the grass is always green.  
Where the bat’s mighty howl robs a man of blessed sleep,  
Where there isn’t any whiskey, and the beer is never cheap.

Somewhere in the South Pacific where the mail is always late  
And a Christmas card in April is considered up to date.  
Where we never have a payday and we never get a cent,  
But we never miss the money because we’d never get it spent.

Somewhere in the South Pacific where the ants and buzzards play,  
And a hundred fresh mosquitoes replace each one you slay,  
So take me back to Frisco; let me hear the mission bell,  
For this godforsaken outpost is a substitute for hell.28

On the surface, White was describing the dense, wet, and impenetrable jungles of Guadalcanal and other islands in the South Pacific and the daily bouts of “chicken shit” tyranny that he and others encountered while in military service overseas. Yet on another level, his verses conveyed to his wife the deep sense of foreboding that he and other black soldiers felt while living and laboring in a zone of combat.

White’s missive also alluded to their trials and tribulations in the South Pacific. At the time, he and other members of a service company of the 25th Infantry Reg-
iment had been assigned to an atoll near Green Island, one of the central staging
points for the segregated unit. Every day during a six-month period, he and his
company alternated between unloading ships and conducting patrol missions be-
fore Australian forces finally relieved them. During his stint of duty on the island,
heightened racial tensions strained relations between black GIs and their com-
manding officers. Of his experiences on Green Island, White recalls: “We had some
of the worst white officers I had seen in my life. I don’t know where the hell they
came from. To make matters worse, on the Green Islands, we didn’t get any mail;
we didn’t get any food. The only reason we didn’t starve to death was because of
them Australians when they came to those islands.” In August 1944, White en-
joyed a small victory of sorts when he and another associate pilfered a case of whiskey
from the tent of his commanding officer and distributed it to men in their com-
pany. He reflected years later, “I saw all this whiskey piled up there, and it was just
me. I figured that I had as much right to it as my CO did, so I just took it.”29

Like Thomas White, other GIs translated their concerns of war into lyrical prose.
In other instances, servicemen used apocalyptic images to convey to people at home
the violent aspects of Pacific War and their meaning for soldiers and civilians alike.
For example, in September 1944, Chicago resident William Couch penned the
following poem, titled “To a Soldier,” in which he described the savagery of war
for his fellow South-siders:

Here where the cock sounds his synchronized song
in a sunless morning
and the caravans of young move towards the
battlefronts, leaving behinded the degraded
cities wild-eyed and dim-lit like an old man
fallen . . .
where flowers and time accumulate to dust
and the barbarous weed grows in the night
night taller than a child’s reach

(O, brother say!)

The planted cannon replies to the
last word, living urge of flesh
that aimlessly scratched the ground with
bayonet point
or, valiant, alert, stealthy [sic] moved into h e l l.30
Scottsboro in the Pacific

More often than not, the oblique messages relayed by division members carried news of racial incidents that were steeped in sexual tension. On 2 June 1944, George Murphy, a field artillery officer stationed in New Guinea, wrote home to his boyhood friend and Chicago Bee columnist Abe Noel, and his words appeared in the black newspaper a few weeks later in the following manner: “Take notice, my friend, that I’m in a new location, trying to duck malaria and dengue fever. Please let my folks in Chicago know my new A.P.O. so that they can be of service to myself and other soldiers.” Murphy then went on to provide commentary on events that shaped the lives of black GIs stationed throughout the Southwest Pacific at the time. He stated, “I see that the NAACP has hold of our Scottsboro case. Remember two of the five boys condemned to die for a trollop instead of for freedom were from my old outfit? . . . We spent much time explaining to the young Australian lawyer hired to defend the men that although the men were charged with rape on the blotter, they committed an even worse crime according to the unwritten code of the American social system.”

The cause célèbre to which George Murphy cryptically alluded had occurred in early 1944. On 15 March six black soldiers in a quartermaster amphibious truck company were accused of raping and having carnal knowledge of two white army nurses in the South Pacific. In many ways, the incident encompassed themes of sexuality, the protection of white womanhood, and political and social arrangements, issues that had historically shaped African American life in the United States. While stationed at Milne Bay, New Guinea, two white GIs, Thomas Havers and James Flanagan, along with two U.S. Army Nurse Corps officers, Ruth Irvine and Marie Weaver, were parked in a restricted shore area when six black men reportedly approached them and forced the women into a wooded area, where they were allegedly assaulted and then raped.

Accounts differed widely, however. The accused men emphatically proclaimed their innocence, insisting that the alleged victims had solicited them for sex but that they had turned them down. However, both Flanagan and Havers claimed that five members of the group threatened to kill them if the women refused to have intercourse with them. Furthermore, when questioned during the initial judge advocate general’s query into the matter, the two nurses appeared confused when asked to identify their attackers during a company formation held at the time, accusing up to nine soldiers who stood in the ranks. But when pressed further by
army investigators, the two women conjured up long-standing images that cast their alleged assailants as black rapists.

As Walter Luszki, an officer who served in New Guinea at the time, points out, the evidence introduced in the court proceeding should have been treated with caution because of the disparity in the accusers’ testimonies, the poor visibility that evening, and the statements of the accused denying that they had had intercourse with the two women.\(^{32}\) Nonetheless, shortly afterward, military authorities arrested the six men and charged them with violating the Twenty-fourth Article of War. At their trial a few months later, court members listened to only three days of testimony before finding all six men guilty, and the judge sentenced each man to die by hanging.\(^{33}\) And with the approval of General Douglas MacArthur, commander in chief of the Southwest Pacific area, the men were promptly transferred 175 miles north from Milne Bay to the New Guinea Detention and Rehabilitation Center, where they awaited summary execution.\(^{34}\) Less than a month later, a small group of the center’s military staff watched as the soldiers’ bodies swung from the gallows.\(^{35}\)

The motivations behind the Southwest Pacific commander’s order to execute the soldiers are unclear. In his memoirs, MacArthur failed to mention the Milne Bay case and other capital-offense cases tried in his theater of operation.\(^{36}\) And as his biographers have pointed out, it is difficult to determine where the Southwest Pacific theater commander stood on the subject of race and military justice.\(^{37}\) But it is possible that the general’s juridical policies reflected southern mores of race, place, and custom. The general kept quiet about the army’s long-standing system of racial segregation and offered virtually no leadership on issues affecting black servicemen in the theater. In fact, he adopted a laissez-faire approach toward civil-military affairs, deferring the administration and adjudication of civic issues to territorial, municipal, and colonial authorities as well as to members of his staff. As Joseph Rauh, an officer who served in MacArthur’s headquarters at the time, recalls, “You know, the military commander in the area can bar people and the general barred any Military Government troops from the States. He wanted to do it out of his own people.”\(^{38}\)

In addition, MacArthur worked diligently with civilian authorities to impose policies restricting relations between black GIs and local women, stationing black units in isolated territories and confining them to racially segregated locales in major urban centers. After black troops arrived in Australia during the early stages of the war, for instance, MacArthur wrote to George Marshall, “I will do everything possible to prevent friction or resentment on the part of the Australian government and people with regard to the presence of colored troops . . . their pol-
icy of ‘White Australia’ is universally accepted here . . . however, by utilizing these troops in the front lines away from the great centres of population . . . I can minimize the difficulties involved.”39 And as the war continued, the general's efforts to maintain the color line in the Pacific also dominated the thinking of white officers and enlisted men throughout the theater. Quite often, efforts made by the Southwest Pacific theater command to regulate interaction between black army personnel and civilian female populations tended to be wrapped up in stereotypical portrayals of black male bestiality and a patriarchal discourse of the protection of white womanhood. As one officer assigned to the 14th Corps at the time commented: “One must go armed on dates or MPs will send girls home because of the danger of attack by Negroes.”40

Throughout the war, cases or incidents involving black GIs accused of rape rarely appeared in major American daily newspapers. But almost a year before the Milne Bay incident, news of a rape case involving two black soldiers stationed in the South Pacific alerted African American service relatives both at home and abroad of the intense battles that black GIs faced. While serving on New Caledonia in May 1943, 19-year-old Frank Fisher and 20-year-old Edward Loury traveled from their encampment to nearby Noumea to enjoy the sights and sounds of a carnival. A few kilometers beyond their base camp, the GIs hailed a ride from two other soldiers who were also planning to attend the event. When the party reached an area described by residents as “Prostitute Hill,” Fisher and Loury alighted from the vehicle and continued their journey to the social function on foot. However, after advancing several hundred yards toward their destination, they encountered a white officer and a New Caledonian woman walking from a wooded area to a jeep parked along the side of the road.

After stopping and exchanging pleasantries, the officer asked the two GIs if they were interested in purchasing sexual favors from the local woman. The officer then addressed the woman in French, and the woman responded in kind, leaving the two black servicemen confused as to what the pair had discussed in their presence. The couple invited the two GIs to a secluded spot in the area where they were induced to engage in sexual relations with the woman, but it is unclear whether the men paid the woman. When Fisher and Loury later reappeared at their bivouac area, the two Port Company members were arrested for the alleged rape of the New Caledonian woman. Less than a month later, the two soldiers appeared before a court-martial trial board, where they were found guilty, sentenced to a dishonorable discharge and life imprisonment at the U.S. Penitentiary, and forced to forfeit their pay and benefits—even though the French penal code in New Caledonia called for a lesser sentence. In addition, the two soldiers were not allowed
to appeal their convictions, and they were subjected to the “third degree” tactics of military police while confined to the stockade.

In the months that followed, William Hastie, chairman of the NAACP National Legal Committee, and Vito Marcantonio, president of the Communist Party–led International Labor Defense, launched a spirited campaign on their behalf, filing petitions with the secretary of war to overturn the original convictions and bringing public attention to the plight of black soldiers in the Pacific theater. Not long afterward, their efforts bore fruit. On 31 March 1944, the assistant secretary of war intervened, reducing the sentences of the two young men from life imprisonment to ten and eight years, respectively. But the overwhelming number of court-martial cases of rape brought against black GIs serving in the Pacific produced an avalanche of criticism of the army’s racial practices from stateside observers. “The petitioners are innocent of the crime of rape,” Marcantonio and Hastie complained, arguing that “there is no room in the United States Army for Scottsboro Cases.”

Thus, by the time black servicemen arrived at their newly assigned island posts at the end of 1944, they had discovered that the racial and sexual arrangements of the Deep South intersected with the rank prerogatives of the American military throughout the Pacific theater. From Australia to Dutch New Guinea to the Philippine Islands, rumors of rampant interracial sexual activity and the paranoid efforts made by white officers and enlisted personnel to impose a racial color line in the Pacific sowed seeds of discontent among African American GIs stationed throughout the theater. As Philadelphia native Clifford Bell, a 23-year-old soldier serving in the Southwest Pacific, put it in a letter he wrote to his mother at the time, “I can understand the treatment that is received by us in the Southern States because it has been going on for years. But it seems just as bad over here. The white soldiers have told the Philippinos [sic] that we are no good and that we are slaves who will rape their women. As far as I can see my service in this man’s army over here has been for white supremacy.”

Samuel Hill and the Transpacific Court of Public Opinion

Clifford Bell was not the only GI in the Southwest Pacific to experience the ways in which sexual politics underlined race relations in the theater. While serving in Dutch New Guinea during the winter of 1945, Samuel Hill witnessed its extraordinary power firsthand. After reverting to divisional control, Hill and his company had moved from Stirling Island to Hollandia, New Guinea, where they received orders to establish a security perimeter covering the supply routes along
Tanahmerah Bay. On 7 January 1945, the 28-year-old noncommissioned officer and another 93rd Division member found themselves embroiled in a politically charged incident when they decided to venture beyond the base headquarters. After searching for souvenirs along the shoreline during that afternoon, the two GIs had no sooner returned to the company area than they were ordered to report to a special company formation where they were identified and charged with sexually assaulting a woman who lived in a nearby village. Although military authorities dropped the charges against the other soldier, the division provost marshal, Major Hugo Goetz, brought charges against Hill for allegedly “forcing and feloniously, against her will, having carnal knowledge” of the native woman. Hill, who insisted on his innocence, faced a sentence of death if convicted.

The court-martial convened on 7 March 1945 at Hollandia. Samuel Jarisetou, a Depapre villager, testified that, on the day of the incident, he had encountered Hill and three other GIs in two villages located near the bay while visiting his adoptive father and his family who lived in the area. Then Jarisetou pointed out that while two of the men left the village, Hill and another soldier stayed behind, claiming that they “were looking for a woman.” He went on to contend that when his father resisted their demands, Hill drew a firearm and placed it near his head while the other serviceman forced one of the women to the ground and raped her. Meanwhile, the prosecution sought to bolster its case by producing a map depicting the trails in the area as a way of firmly establishing a link between the whereabouts of the two soldiers and the time that it would have taken them to negotiate the distance between the two villages. Finally, the prosecution produced Baroe Banondi, the alleged victim, who had pointed to ten men present at the hearing earlier as accessories to the crime. Under cross-examination, however, Banondi confessed to members of the court-martial hearing board that she could not recall ever meeting Hill even though she had identified him as the culprit two months earlier.

Banondi’s conflicting testimony reflected the precarious notions that African American GIs in the division and South Pacific Islanders held vis-à-vis each other and how their understandings of each other informed their initial encounters throughout the theater. On the one hand, the views that black GIs held of South Pacific natives were shaped by discourse on South Pacific civilization that was prominent in black newspapers during the period. During the early stages of the war, the African American press tended to describe Fijians, New Guineans, and other Pacific islanders as “Fussy-Wuzzies” and “headhunters.” And more often than not, these stereotypical images were linked to the popular images of South Seas women depicted in Hollywood films like *South of Tahiti* that were released just
prior to the division’s arrival in the area. While stationed in New Guinea, the division personnel couldn’t help but draw upon these images while meeting the island women in the area. For example, after making contact with the native population that spring, Cecil Davis, an officer with a company in the 368th Infantry, wrote home to a distant relative, “As we walked through the streets of the village, I first saw the female of the species—not one, but many of them, peeping at us from doors, windows, and from behind huts.” Davis went on to add, “The women who had gone back to their jobs, were clad only in a red cloth made to resemble a skirt and worn very low on the hips. They were not as handsome as the men.”

On the other hand, while it is difficult to pinpoint with precision the images that Pacific islanders held of American GIs, the scant evidence of their impressions of the black American GIs they encountered during this period reflects deep-seated feelings of alienation and cultural misunderstanding. For example, Peter Lait, who was 8 years old when he lived in the nearby village of Tadis, New Guinea, during the war, recalled years later, “There were some black American soldiers, probably not Papua New Guineans. They were with the white Americans. And when the Americans came, they caused confusion among us.”

Witnesses called to the stand during Samuel Hill’s court-martial hearing presented contradictory versions of the incident. As doubts about Hill’s guilt mounted, eyewitnesses for the defense focused on two main issues: Hill’s whereabouts and the time frame in which the incident had taken place. Private Alford Edwards, a member of the company’s second squad, testified that he had accompanied Hill to an oil dump near Tanamerah Bay that morning and that the young sergeant had been with him when the alleged incident had taken place. Sergeant Jackson Meadows, the second squad commander, added that he saw the Detroit, Michigan, native that morning but did not see him again until one-thirty that afternoon. Private Sammie Oglesby told the board that he had seen Hill and Edwards standing along the waterfront at the very moment the shots rang out and that Hill was unarmed. Shortly afterward, he recalled, he was approached by Samuel Jarisetou and asked for the names of the two soldiers, to which he responded “Frankenstein” and “Count Basil.” But most important, Oglesby, along with other servicemen called to the witness stand, recalled seeing Hill in the company area between one and two-thirty that afternoon, refuting the prosecution’s contention that he had returned to the encampment much later.

Hill’s senior officers, serving as witnesses for the defense, also refuted the evidence presented by the prosecution. For instance, the prosecution had used tire tracks from a jeep to claim that Hill was present at the village during the incident. However, Lieutenant Everett M. Porter, Company L’s executive officer, testified that
both of the vehicles that were assigned to the unit were present and accounted for throughout the day in question. In addition, Captain William P. Hurd, his superior officer, took the stand on behalf of his NCO, pointing up the efficiency ratings that showed Hill to be an exemplary soldier. The lack of evidence in the case and Hill’s distinguished service record made very little difference, however. On a secret written ballot, three-fourths of the all-white court-martial board found the noncommissioned officer guilty and sentenced him to death within two days.51

The controversy surrounding Hill’s trial and the speedy conviction reached by top-ranking officers in New Guinea gripped the attention of division members stationed throughout the Southwest Pacific area. While attending the proceedings, Captain Matthew Lowe, the regiment’s ranking chaplain, and Captain S. McMaster Kerr, the base stockade chaplain, both noted the fault-ridden process that resulted in Hill’s conviction. Prior to the hearing, the black and white men of the cloth met the defendant and began raising objections about the racial constitution of officers appointed to the board. In early February, Lowe wrote a letter to 93rd Infantry Division commander, Major General Harry Johnson, requesting that he appoint black officers to the General Court. “There are many known instances in the history of American Civil Courts in which decisions involving Negroes have been revoked and new trials ordered by higher courts on the grounds that possible prejudice existed since no Negroes were chosen to sit on the jury trying the case,” Lowe argued. And although Kerr did not “personally question the integrity of any White Officer who might be chosen to constitute the court,” he informed the commanding general that “Sergeant Hill feels there is a strong possibility of prejudice.”52 Nevertheless, the requests made by the religious leaders were greeted with silence from the division’s highest-ranking officer.

Why the division high command elected to take such a noncommittal stance remains unclear. A career officer with the Texas National Guard, Johnson had been selected by 6th Army commander Lieutenant General Walter Krueger to assume command of the division in August 1944 after leaving North Africa, where he led the recently disbanded 2nd Cavalry Division.53 For the Southwest Pacific field commander, Johnson’s assignment to the segregated unit was ideal, for the Houston native had long enjoyed a reputation as a highly professional officer who stressed moderation on questions of race. But more important, Johnson had ably displayed the ability to lead African American troops, a talent that made him uniquely qualified in the eyes of his superiors for service in the Southwest Pacific theater area. “I’ve served with colored troops for many years and I think I know them as well as any white man ever could,” Johnson once claimed.54 Press correspondent Charles Loeb of the National Negro Press Association also admired the general and ob-
served while touring Hollandia that “the men are crazy about the general. They’d go to hell for him.” However, critics argued that Johnson’s reluctance to use his influence to eliminate racial prejudice in the units he led only aggravated the plight of the men who served under him.

After Hill’s conviction and throughout his appeal of the case, Chaplains Kerr and Lowe conducted their own investigation into the case, upon which they discovered the patchwork aspects of the evidence presented by the prosecution, casting further doubt on the legitimacy of the whole trial. In the weeks following the trial, the two clergymen again wrote a joint letter to the 93rd commander, raising questions regarding the victim and the eyewitnesses who failed to identify Hill as the assailant during the trial. They also charged that while one of the prosecution’s main witnesses claimed that he had seen Hill in the village that day, he was not present when the alleged act had taken place. They also pointed to the fact that a medical report, completed prior to the trial, found no physical evidence of rape in the case. Moreover, when the priests visited the stockade during the trial, two GIs approached them and confessed to committing all the actions attributed to Hill in the case except the actual rape.

After they failed to elicit an adequate response from the division high command, Lowe and Kerr sought assistance from the area Judge Advocate General’s Office in Australia to plead their case. Pointing up the pervasive nature of racial prejudice in the military’s prosecution of the case, the religious ministers told the assistant judge advocate general, “The hostility of the court was in evidence throughout the trial and the law members displayed a bias attitude toward the accused by frequently restricting the counsel in question and explanations.” “The facts of this case and trial will undoubtedly be brought to the attention of the American public and especially those organizations (White, Negro, and mixed) and individuals who are manifesting a deep interest in Negroes in the armed forces and particularly in the Ninety-third Infantry division,” they warned.

Even as the two chaplains spoke, word of Hill’s case and the plight of the 93rd Infantry Division members serving in the Netherlands East Indies area raced across the Pacific Ocean into the homes of black service families and neighborhoods, producing a rippling effect throughout the African American community. While confined to the area stockade, Hill dispatched a letter through Chaplain Lowe to his brother Theodore and sister Grace Davis, informing them of his predicament. He then went on to ask them to request a transcript of his court-martial hearing from the Judge Advocate General’s Office in Washington, D.C., and upon receiving the copies, to forward them on to the NAACP national headquarters. “I’m writing this letter so that you know that I’m still overseas and in a great deal of trou-
ble,” Hill told his siblings. As an active member in the local Detroit branch, Theodore turned first to the NAACP national office to seek his brother’s release. The 36-year-old Detroit machinist ended his letter by stating emphatically, “I am a member of the NAACP. Can you help us?”

As the controversy surrounding Hill’s arrest, trial, and incarceration began to surface, local NAACP branches in towns and cities across the United States mobilized into action. In Hill’s hometown of Detroit, branch members launched a vigorous campaign on his behalf, staging rallies and speaking engagements at the Exhor Temple. In the District of Columbia, more than three hundred members representing the local NAACP branch and an array of local church, civic, political, and fraternal organizations held a series of discussions before drafting a resolution calling for an army inquiry into the number of court-martial proceedings brought against black soldiers in the Pacific. In addition, conferees drafted a petition demanding that Congress pass permanent fair employment practices legislation. Among the 93rd Infantry Division relatives and friends who attended the meetings were Thomasina Johnson, Pauline Redmond Coggs, Minnie Wrenn, and Mordecai Johnson. And in Philadelphia, more than two hundred people packed St. Matthews Church, where they listened to Walter White and other NAACP officials discuss Hill’s case and the Pacific theater activities of soldiers who were members of their congregation. After the two-hour session, they adopted a resolution demanding that the War Department investigate the merits of the case.

Once the local calls for Hill’s clemency quickened, members of the national office of the NAACP and the black press followed suit. Immediately upon returning from the Pacific in early April, NAACP executive secretary Walter White met with Undersecretary of War Robert P. Patterson. Among the items the two men discussed were Samuel Hill and the disproportionate numbers of cases brought against black servicemen stationed in the Southwest Pacific. And former 93rd Division serviceman and assistant special counsel Franklin H. Williams and other officials at the national NAACP headquarters in New York collected sworn statements from Chaplains Lowe and Kerr that they attached to a brief filed with the secretary of war, demanding clemency on Hill’s behalf. “It is our belief that Samuel Hill is innocent of the crime of which he has been convicted and we hope that the enclosed material will be given full and favorable consideration by the Clemency board when his case comes before that board for review,” Williams stated.

Hill’s case combined with the public’s growing awareness of African American contribution in the Southwest Pacific may have bolstered the number of NAACP memberships among division servicemen. Within the unit, memberships grew slowly. In February 1944, only 93 troops joined the NAACP. But between No-
vember of that year and March 1945, the number of membership applications filed by black division soldiers and officers stationed throughout the Southwest Pacific jumped from 3,600 to well over 5,000. Primary recruiters during the membership drives included African American clergy led by Oscar Holder, Andrew Johnson, Everett Hewlett, John Bowman, and Harlee Little, most of whom ministered to the men at the regimental level. Of the growing number of division personnel flocking to the organization, executive secretary Walter White remarked after returning from the Pacific, “We are going to have a great reservoir of support in the postwar years from the men out there who seem to be deeply grateful for our interest in their welfare.”

As Samuel Hill’s case attests, the actions taken by spokespeople and organizations within the African American community to safeguard the interests of black division servicemen stationed throughout the Southwest Pacific were prompted by the GIs’ abilities to resist and transcend the racial prejudice of and mistreatment by the military authorities in the theater and their close relationships with their families and communities. Once African Americans stateside learned of the travails faced by black uniformed personnel in the Pacific, they often decided to take active roles, demanding that army authorities remedy the abuses that black soldiers faced in the region. The potential for a relationship between black military families and the black elite was partly based on the ability of prominent organizations and leaders to mobilize their resources in ways that assisted the families’ efforts. Although both parties expressed grave concern over the well-being of black division members, the events in the Southwest Pacific would present new challenges to that relationship. Indeed, as the division progressed toward the Philippines, the fluid conditions of the Asian-Pacific war and the continuous physical and psychological strain of fighting in the island jungles would soon precipitate strategies and tactics to which traditional modes of protest would hardly apply.

Race across the Southwest Pacific

In April 1945, the 93rd Infantry Division reassembled at Morotai Island. After arriving on the island’s forward area, the unit relieved the U.S. 31st Infantry Division as the principal force in the area. The division’s mission was to operate the supply points as the chief administrative army organization in the area. Yet as soon as 93rd servicemen reported to the area, they found themselves working feverishly alongside the Australian dock crews, most of whom had been overwhelmed by the backlogged supplies and equipment waiting to be shipped to Allied troops staging for the Australian invasion of Borneo. Within a two-month period, the
men in the division had unloaded nearly 320,000 tons of supplies and equipment and had managed to obtain an average tonnage output per hatch per man higher than that of any other organization in the theater. For their efforts, members of the division received a special commendation from 8th Army Headquarters in July 1945.

In the minds of most 93rd Division soldiers, their survival strategies and job performances were inextricably tied together. As he inspected the unit in May 1945, medical officer Captain Robert Bennett noted: “Despite their adversities, they are doing their utmost by their accomplishments to continue to prove that they are the best outfit from every point in this theater. Despite the types of missions assigned to them, they have performed each time in a superior manner, as evidenced by the commendations that have piled high upon them. Yet they continue to be by-passed and unnoticed.” Likewise, Captain George Leighton witnessed the important duties carried out by black servicemen in the Moluccas. While visiting bases where division members were stationed, he remarked, “I have seen Negro engineers building roads over which important supplies have gone from depot to ships. I have seen Negro quartermaster battalions organize and operate depots that supplied frontline troops in contact with the enemy thousand miles away. But I have also seen Negro stevedores with units in Finschafen with sweat on their faces and their rifles nearby to fight off the Japs. With numerous Negro troops performing work in this manner, that would make any group proud.”

As they served in these administrative functions, many black 93rd GIs encountered racism in the Southwest Pacific theater. Some of the incidents occurred between black and white GIs, and they often nearly came to blows. For example, upon landing at the southernmost tip of Morotai in April 1945, several members of the 369th Infantry clashed with military policemen of the 31st Infantry Division after they were physically and verbally assaulted while visiting a nearby hospital. Only after the 93rd Division’s commanding officer replaced the all-white military policemen with those from his unit and the 31st Division departed for the invasion of the Philippines was the deadly situation diffused.

This was not the last time that the two organizations would exchange unpleasantities, however. Later that year, a shootout nearly occurred between soldiers in the 93rd’s 368th Infantry Regiment and members of the 31st Division after twenty black GIs had attempted to employ several Filipino women as domestic servants. When it was all over, the commanding generals of both divisions reprimanded the officers and NCOs who were involved, but they issued a directive restricting only the black soldiers from using the recreation areas. John Howard had vivid memories of the 31st Division: “Many of these soldiers were from the Deep South
and brought to their experience their built-in feelings about black people. They tried to avoid our unit as much as possible.”  

Julius Becton expressed a somewhat different view: “The fact that the 93rd Division and the 31st Division shared several islands showed a lack of sensitivity to the racial issue by General MacArthur and his commanders.” Conversely, theater censors quoted an unnamed officer with the 31st Division who wrote home describing the roles that the National Guard outfit had envisioned for themselves and where they stood in relation to all-black units stationed throughout the area at the time: “This division is more or less famed for its ability to ‘handle’ the niggers. Race hatred is actually encouraged by both Battalion and Regimental Commanders.”

Even so, some black 93rd GIs and their white comrades developed a better appreciation of each other after making close contact on occasion. For example, while guarding two Japanese officers in June 1945, Edward Quinn, a white U.S. 7th Division infantryman from Rome, New York, and John Simpson, a soldier from Birmingham, Alabama, flew to Tacloban, Leyte, where they spent three days with members of the 369th Infantry. Quinn recalled, “We were hosted by 369th Infantry Regiment that was based north of Puerto Princess. Our prisoners were also guarded by a squad from the U.S. 93rd Infantry Division. We shared the tents, food, and lives of the men of the 93rd and were treated royally. I remember they even shared their beer rations with us. The soldier who accompanied me was out of his element, however, because he later told me that he only thought of colored people as ‘niggers.’ Although this experience only lasted three or four days, it left me with a favorable, lasting impression about the men of the Ninety-third Division.”

The hopes of interracial cooperation that some black division members and white servicemen shared while serving together in the Pacific were soon dashed by racial hatred spewed by policymakers back in Washington, D.C., however. On 29 June 1945, Mississippi congressman James O. Eastland stood on the Senate floor and delivered a blistering speech, disparaging the performance of black troops in Europe. Questioning the suitability of permanent fair employment practices legislation, the junior senator from the Magnolia State argued that the agency granted an unfair advantage to returning black soldiers, who in his estimation were “an utter and dismal failure in combat in Europe.” Citing the activities of troops serving with the U.S. 92nd Infantry Division in Italy, Eastland claimed, “The soldiers had no initiative, no sense of responsibility, very low intelligence, and were a failure. . . . It was a mistake to send them to Europe, they should be returned from Europe and sent to the Pacific, where there are races of color. . . . Why are we being asked to set an unfair preference against the white soldier for the benefit of the returning Negro veteran, solely because he is a member of a
minority group which sells its votes to the highest bidder in political campaigns?” Eastland queried.  

The Mississippi statesman soon had an answer to his question. Two weeks later, Undersecretary of War Robert Patterson vehemently denied Eastland's charges against the 92nd Infantry Division during a press conference and claimed that the senator had misrepresented the views of the American commanders in Europe. Pointing to remarks made by generals Dwight D. Eisenhower, Douglas MacArthur, and Ira Eaker, Patterson went on to chronicle the favorable reports that the Inspector General's Office had received regarding the performance of black troops in European and Pacific theaters. “The statements of the commanders in the field do not support the conclusions drawn by Senator Eastland,” he argued.

In the Southwest Pacific, officers of the 93rd Division fashioned their own collective response to the Mississippi congressman. A few weeks after Eastland made his remarks, Lieutenant Edward D. Smith-Green and other officers were flabbergasted when they received a copy of the Pittsburgh Courier and read the senator’s diatribe against black servicemen. Angry and embittered, the 25-year-old Brooklyn, New York, native and fifteen other officers dashed off an open letter to the Courier, arguing that, “as appointed leaders of men, the plight and embarrassment of our soldier, all soldiers, who read such speeches, concerns us. Out here we have learned to work together, play together, fight and suffer together—not as white or Negro soldiers—just soldiers. White soldiers, Negro soldiers, soldiers of Jewish, Italian, German, and Japanese extraction, soldiers of every race, color, and creed who are real Americans will make their combined will quite evident to all concerned when they can once more speak and act for themselves.” “With the exception of our families, no one who has not been in this inferno is qualified to speak a word against us,” they insisted.

Meanwhile, service families in the United States translated Green’s call into action. About three weeks after Eastland’s speech, 93rd Division officer Judson Williams’s mother, Marie, decided to act on behalf of her son and others who wore the nation's uniform. In late July, the Philadelphia native wrote the Mississippi senator, demanding that he apologize for his impugning statements regarding the performance of black servicemen in the war. A few days later, the elderly black woman, along with twenty-five hundred division relatives from the New Jersey cities of Patterson, Princeton, and Newark, spearheaded a letter-writing campaign, demanding that the army chief of staff publicly repudiate Senator Eastland’s attack on the integrity of African Americans serving in Europe and Asia. “The senator’s unwarranted attacks hit colored soldiers fighting at the battlefront below the belt,” she argued. When later asked about her actions, Williams replied, “I
keep up with the news and follow important commentators. What I don’t agree with, I try to take in stride but I could not take Senator Eastland’s unfair, untruthful, and hateful attack.”

By the end of July, division troops had barely reported to duty in the Southwest Pacific when they discovered that the danger of serving on Morotai was heightened considerably by the threat that the remaining 500 Japanese troops on the island and 35,000 enemy forces on nearby Halmahera posed to its main perimeter. To counter the possibility of enemy reinforcement, 93rd Division patrols were sent out daily to stop all Japanese island movement during the spring and summer months of 1945. Negotiating the lush green jungle in the Libano and Tijoe areas, squad patrols led by Glen Allen, Arnett Hartsfield, John Sarazen, and George Shuffer engaged in extensive operations between the Radja and Bobo rivers.

In early August, a nine-man patrol led by Stanley Nakanishi and Alfonzia Dillon maneuvered along the Tijoe River, where they encountered and captured Colonel Muisu Ouchi, commander of all Japanese troops on Morotai and the highest-ranking Japanese officer captured during the war. Around the same time, elements of 369th Infantry Regiment’s Company L advanced along the tributaries of the Libano River, where they drew fierce gunfire from a large enemy command post. After subduing the threat, they captured several members of Ouchi’s high command. After the elements of the division moved on to the Jolo area of the Philippine Islands during the closing phases of the war, troops of the 368th Infantry under the command of Alamanca Williams of Crawfordville, Indiana, and Ricardo Santioga of New York City endured numerous enemy attacks as they conducted steady reconnaissance of Japanese positions. Negotiating the nearly impenetrable jungles and mountainous terrain, division troops worked diligently to drive out and destroy enemy forces commanded by Major General Tetsuzo Suzuki. Among those who participated in the action were William Ray, Dunbar Gibson, Robert McDaniel, John Blalark, John Coghlan, Raymond Jenkins, and James Whittico.

Meanwhile, Lieutenant Wallace Gant and GIs attached to the 25th Infantry and the 369th Infantry had just completed their patrolling missions on Morotai and Jolo when they learned that hostilities had ceased on 10 August. Expressing a deep sense of relief, Nelson Peery may have voiced what was on the mind of many of the men when he wrote from the front at end of the war: “Our job has been to hold the island, theirs to retake it. It’s really nasty business hunting them down like dogs and killing them but of course they have also killed some of us. But most of all we paid an exceedingly small price of our victory.” According to Edwin Lee, “It was sort of like a cops and robbers comedy because there must have been