

## **Desegregating the Armed Forces** <sup>[1]</sup>

By David McKeeby

African Americans have served in the U.S. military since the days of George Washington, but it took until July 26, 1948, for the country to begin living up the democratic ideals that they fought to defend.

The year 2008 marked the 60th anniversary of President Harry S. Truman's Executive Order 9981, issued July 26, 1948, declaring that "there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion or national origin."

As many as 5,000 African Americans, drawn largely from the population of free blacks living in the Northern states, but also from the slaveholding South, are estimated to have served beside whites in the Continental Army during the American Revolution. When America fought a devastating Civil War from 1861 to 1865, more than 100,000 African Americans served in the Union forces.

Although the Civil War ended slavery in the United States, the nation failed to address deep-rooted prejudices based on race and class in America, allowing bigotry and segregation to continue tarnishing the American dream.

Nevertheless, prominent 19th-century African American leaders, including civil rights pioneers Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. DuBois, encouraged black men to serve in the U.S. military, believing that by proving their loyalty and courage, they eventually could improve their position in American society in the face of discriminatory segregation laws and the ever-present threat of violence facing African Americans, particularly in the South.

"Let the black man get upon his person the brass letters, U.S.," wrote Douglass. "Let him get an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder and bullets in his pocket, there is no power on earth that can deny that he has earned his right to citizenship."

## **From Buffalo Soldiers to Tuskegee Airmen**

Although often confined in separate, white-led, noncombat labor units, African American soldiers volunteered time and again for combat and field medical duties. They served with distinction during the Civil War in the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry regiment, immortalized in the 1989 film *Glory*; in the black cavalry units known as the "Buffalo Soldiers," who fought in the Indian wars and the Spanish-American War; and in the 369th Infantry, the "Hell Fighters from Harlem," who were awarded the French Croix de Guerre (Cross of War) for their heroism during World War I.

As World War II approached, the United States found itself opposed to fascist regimes and their racist ideologies <sup>[2]</sup>, yet it had to reckon with the hard reality that many of its own 12.6 million African-American citizens -- about 10 percent of the population at the time -- were denied basic civil rights and human opportunities.

The bitter irony that President Franklin D. Roosevelt's "Four Freedoms" (freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want and freedom from fear) set forth as U.S. war aims were largely unavailable to African Americans did not stop 2.5 million black men from registering for the military draft. More than one million eventually served in all branches of the armed forces during World War II. In addition, thousands of African-American women volunteered as combat nurses.

At the same time, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Urban League and other organizations appealed to the White House and the military, winning the integration of officers' training and expanding opportunities for all-black units.

Among the best-known black units in World War II were the Tuskegee Airmen, a group of African American military pilots, who distinguished themselves in Allied campaigns in North African and the Mediterranean, becoming the only fighter escort group never to lose an Allied bomber to enemy action during the war.

African American truck drivers and mechanics were also the backbone of the "Red Ball Express," the massive effort to keep the Allies supplied as they moved across Europe to end the war.

## **"And when I say 'All Americans'"**

Toward the end of the war, in 1944-45, the military began experimenting with integrated units to meet personnel shortages during the Battle of the Bulge on the German-Belgium border and elsewhere. As a result, more than 80 percent of the white officers reported that African American soldiers had performed "very well" in combat and 69 percent saw no reason why African American infantrymen should not perform as well as white infantrymen if both had the same training and experience.

But back home, racist attitudes persisted. When returning African American veterans became victims of violence in South

Carolina and Georgia, President Truman took bold action, submitting a package of wide-ranging civil rights reforms to Congress and using his constitutional authority as commander in chief of the U.S. military to order desegregation of the armed forces.

"It is my deep conviction that we have reached a turning point in the long history of our efforts to guarantee a freedom and equality to all our citizens," he told members of the NAACP in a 1947 speech. "And when I say all Americans -- I mean all Americans."

By the end of the Korean War in 1953, the U.S. military was almost completely desegregated, including desegregation of buses and schools on military bases.

Sixty years later, it is evident that Truman's order transformed not only the armed forces, but broader American society as well, by serving as a powerful blow against segregation and further opening the way to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

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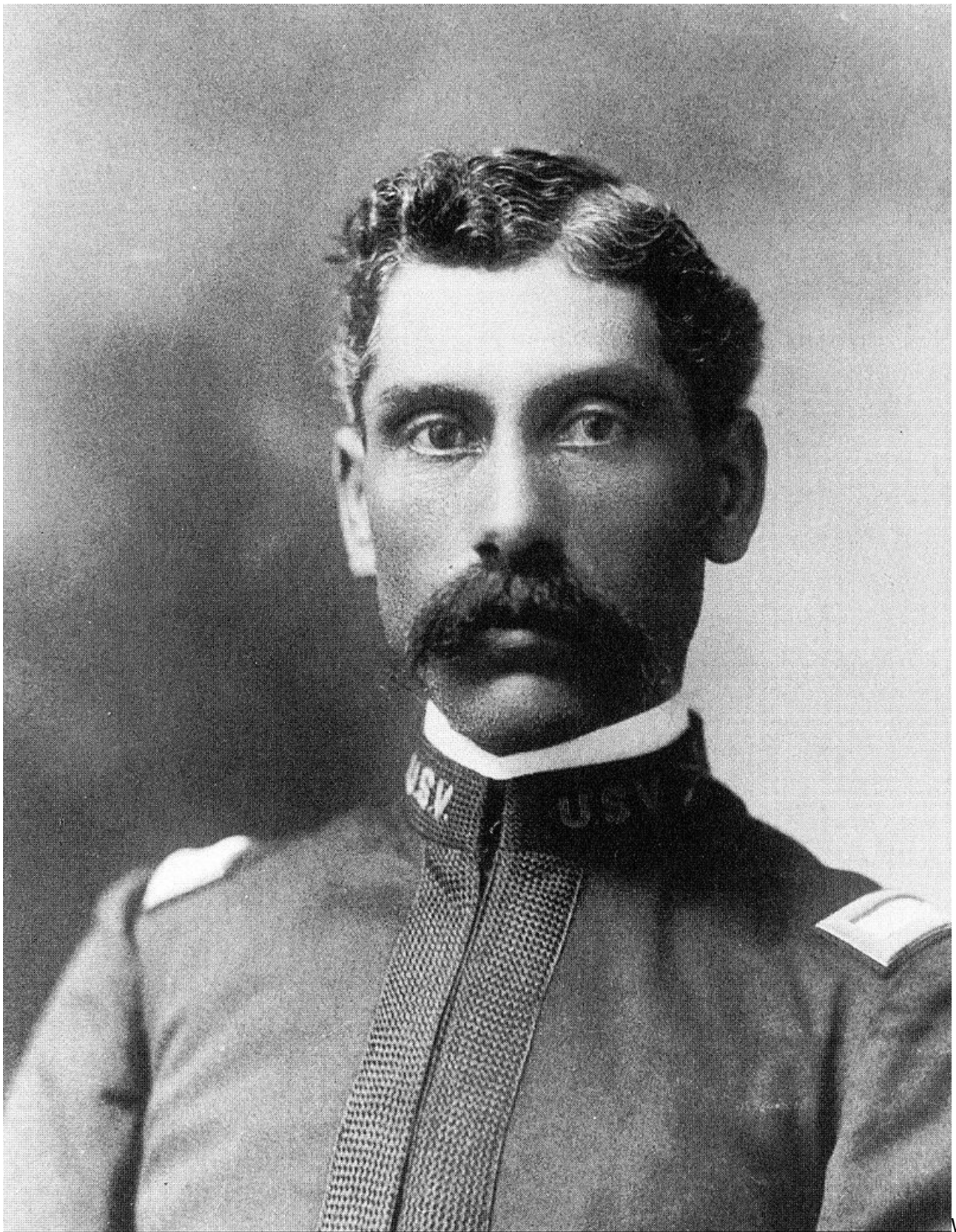
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**People:**



William

McBryar <sup>[14]</sup>

Buffalo Soldier & Officer from Bladen and Guilford Counties, NC  
Received the Congressional Medal of Honor

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James William Alston <sup>[15]</sup>

WWI Veteran from Wake County, NC  
Member of U.S. Army's first African American officer training school, 1917

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<sup>[16]</sup>[James Timonty Brynm](#) <sup>[16]</sup>

WWI Army Veteran and military band leader  
From Franklin County, NC  
Well-known composer and musician, played at Carnegie Hall in 1912

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[Wilson Vash Eagleson II](#) <sup>[17]</sup>

Tuskegee Airman  
Grew up in Henderson, NC

**For Teachers:**



<sup>[18]</sup>[Desegregation of the Armed Forces](#) <sup>[18]</sup>

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JULY 26, 1948

## EXECUTIVE ORDER

ESTABLISHING THE PRESIDENT'S COMMITTEE ON  
EQUALITY OF TREATMENT AND OPPORTUNITY IN  
THE ARMED SERVICES

WHEREAS it is essential that there be maintained in the armed services of the United States the highest standards of democracy, with equality of treatment and opportunity for all those who serve in our country's defense:

NOW, THEREFORE, by virtue of the authority vested in me as President of the United States, by the Constitution and the statutes of the United States, and as Commander in Chief of the armed services, it is hereby ordered as follows:

1. It is hereby declared to be the policy of the President that there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion or national origin. This policy shall be put into effect as rapidly as possible, having due regard to the time required to effectuate any necessary changes without impairing efficiency or morale.
2. There shall be created in the National Military Establishment an advisory committee to be known as the President's Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services, which shall be composed of seven members to be designated by the President.
3. The Committee is authorized on behalf of the President to examine into the rules, procedures and practices of the armed services in order to determine in what respect such rules, procedures and practices may be altered or improved with a view to carrying out the policy of this order. The Committee shall confer and advise with the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of the Army, the Secretary of the Navy, and the Secretary of the Air Force, and shall make such recommendations to the President and to said Secretaries as in the judgment of the Committee will effectuate the policy hereof.
4. All executive departments and agencies of the Federal Government are authorized and directed to cooperate with the Committee in its work, and to furnish the Committee such information or the services of such persons as the Committee may require in the performance of its duties.
5. When requested by the Committee to do so, persons in the armed services or in any of the executive departments and agencies of the Federal Government shall testify before the Committee and shall make available for the use of the Committee such documents and other information as the Committee may require.
6. The Committee shall continue to exist until such time as the President shall terminate its existence by Executive order.

HARRY S. TRUMAN

THE WHITE HOUSE

July 26, 1948

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President Harry Truman desegregates

the armed forces

Executive Order July 26, 1948 [22]

3 January 2018

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