



## **Take a Memo**

### Understanding African American Soldiers on the Home Front

A Lesson from  
the Education Department

The National WWII Museum  
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[www.nationalww2museum.org/learn/education](http://www.nationalww2museum.org/learn/education)

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### Understanding African American Soldiers on the Home Front

Primary sources can be documents, pictures, interviews with someone who lived through the time period being studied, or artifacts that were produced during a certain time. Instead of merely reading second-hand descriptions (secondary sources) of how African American soldiers felt about discrimination during WWII, historians will also want to read any official papers from those soldiers. Brigadier General Benjamin O. Davis wrote about those realities in a memo to the War Department in 1943.

**OBJECTIVE:** By reading General Davis's memorandum to the War Department and answering questions about it, students will learn about the limitations and discrimination endured by black servicemen during WWII. Students will gain an appreciation for researching WWII history using primary documents.

**GRADE LEVEL:** 7-12

#### **COMMON CORE STANDARDS:**

##### **ELA Anchor Standards for Reading, Writing and Speaking & Listening:**

CCRA.R.5 Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.

CCRA.W.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

CCRA.SL.4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

##### **Literacy in History/Social Studies:**

RH.6-8.1 Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

RH.6-8.6 Identify aspects of a text that reveal an author's point of view or purpose (e.g., loaded language, inclusion or avoidance of particular facts).

RH.9-10.2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

RH.11-12.9 Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

#### **HISTORY STANDARDS:**

History Thinking Standard 4—the student interrogates historical data by uncovering the social, political, and economic context in which it was created.

Historical Thinking Standard 5—the student identifies issues and problems in the past and analyzes the interests, values, perspectives, and points of view of those involved in the situation.

**TIME REQUIREMENT:** One to two class periods.

**MATERIALS:** Copies of General Davis' 1943 memorandum to the War Department  
"Take a Memo" student worksheet  
Fact sheet: *African Americans in World War II: Fighting for a Double Victory*

**KEY TERMS:**

- **"Colored:"** a negative but commonly-used term in the United States during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century to refer to non-white people, especially African Americans.
- **Double-Victory:** the term given to the wartime civil rights campaign by African American leaders and organizations during WWII which called for the defeat of fascism and the enemy abroad and the defeat of segregation at home in the United States.
- **Jim Crow laws:** state and local laws that were passed after the American Civil War through the 1960s which were designed to enforce segregation and discrimination against African Americans and other minorities. These laws were named after a black character in minstrel shows.
- **Point of view:** a position from which someone or something is observed; the mental position or attitude from which a story is observed or narrated
- **Primary source:** an original or first-hand document, story or object that was created by someone during the time period under study
- **Secondary source:** an account, object, or interpretation of an event which was created by someone without first-hand experience of the time period under study.
- **Segregation:** the practice or policy of creating separate facilities and laws for minorities; often refers to the system of discrimination against African Americans that was established in the South after the Civil War.
- **Service unit:** a non-combat military group responsible for providing support services to fighting troops like construction or food preparation.

**PRIOR KNOWLEDGE:**

This lesson can correspond with the study of African American participation and roles during WWII or be used as a review of primary and secondary historical sources.

**DIRECTIONS:**

1. Review the terms/concepts of primary and secondary sources with your class. Introduce the lesson with a brief summary of African American experiences during WWII and highlight important ideas and vocabulary such as segregation and the "Double Victory" campaign. You may find the African Americans in WWII fact sheet and key terms list above helpful for this task. The fact sheet can be read aloud to the class or passed out for them to read on their own the night before the lesson.
2. Introduce students to General Benjamin O. Davis as the United States' first African American general. Pass out copies of the General's 1943 memorandum to the War Department for students to read. The memo describes the condition of African American soldiers stationed in the South and make recommendations for improvement of those conditions.
3. Teachers may want to divide students into pairs and assign them one paragraph of the memo to read and analyze on their own; alternately, they can have students read it out loud, then reconvene the entire class for a discussion of their findings.
4. Tell students to underline key words and important phrases while they are reading the memo, and to list or circle any words that they don't understand. They should also write the main idea of each paragraph in the left-hand margin of the memo sheet.
5. Pass out worksheet questions for students to complete on their own or in pairs.
6. Hold a class discussion to explore students' answers.

**ASSESSMENT:** Components for assessment include the worksheet, note taking on the memo sheet, and the class discussion.

**ENRICHMENT:** 1. Have students compose memos to the principal of the school relating an issue of importance. These memos can be shared in class, and the teacher will decide if they will be presented to the principal. Students may want to address school issues in another form, such as a petition, an article in the school newspaper, or a school campaign and election.

2. Have students listen to one or more of the following WWII oral histories about the experiences of African Americans in the military at <http://ww2online.org>. How do these stories compare with the points that General Davis presents in his memo? How do they differ?

- [Vernon Baker](#): Army, Medal of Honor recipient
- [Wallace Baptiste](#): Navy, USS Hopkins
- [Joseph Hairston](#): Army, 92<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division (NOTE: this interview contains strong and graphic language)
- [William Holloman III](#): U.S. Army Air Corps Reserve
- [John Leahr](#): 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group, Tuskegee Airman
- [Charles McGee](#): 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group, Tuskegee Airman
- [Eugene Tarrant](#): Navy, USS San Francisco

3. As a longer-term research project, have students research, conduct, and transcribe an oral history interview with a living U.S. veteran to learn more about changes within the U.S. military to become more equal and inclusive for all American soldiers in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries. Students should review interviews from [The Digital Collections of The National WWII Museum](#) and the Museum's [Oral History Guidelines](#) to learn more about interviewing techniques and best practices.

4. Students can explore the Home Front experiences of African Americans and other WWII high school students by examining and comparing/contrasting yearbooks from the Museum's [See You Next Year! High School Yearbooks website at ww2yearbooks.org](#). Specific yearbooks of interest include all African American [Dunbar High School](#) (Dayton, Ohio) and segregated [Topeka High School](#) (Topeka, Kansas). The latter high school and school system would be featured 10 years later in the landmark civil rights Brown vs. Board of Education Supreme Court case and decision in 1954.

**RESOURCES:**

The National WWII Museum

- *Fighting for the Right to Fight* exhibition: [www.righttofightexhibit.org](http://www.righttofightexhibit.org)
- [The Digital Collections of The National WWII Museum](#): [ww2online.org](http://ww2online.org)
- [Focus On: African Americans in WWII feature](#)
- [Focus On: Tuskegee Airmen feature](#)
- [Focus On: Vernon Baker feature](#)
- [Home Front lesson plans: People of Color](#)
- [Pearl Harbor Research Starter](#), featuring Dorie Miller, the first African American to receive the Navy Cross for his brave actions on the USS West Virginia during the Japanese surprise attack.

- [See You Next Year! High School Yearbooks from WWII](http://ww2yearbooks.org) website:  
ww2yearbooks.org
- [Virtual Field Trip: Double Victory: African Americans in WWII](#)

WAR DEPARTMENT  
OFFICE OF THE INSPECTOR GENERAL  
WASHINGTON

9 November 1943

MEMORANDUM FOR GENERAL PETERSON.

1. During the last two months I have, with Mr. Gibson, the Civilian Aide to the Secretary of War, visited the colored troops at the following stations: Fort Devens, Massachusetts; the New York Port of Embarkation (New York City, Brooklyn, Camp Shanks and Mitchel Field, New York; Camp Kilmer and Fort Dix, New Jersey), Selfridge Field and Oscoda, Michigan. During 1941, 1942, and the early part of this year, my visits were made to the stations located in the southeastern states, Indiana, Kentucky, Missouri, Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, Arizona, and Illinois.
2. I have reviewed inspection reports and investigations made by other inspectors general from this office and the field. I was deeply impressed with the high morale and attitudes of the colored officers and soldiers stationed in the states visited in the past two months. They were so different from those of the colored officers and soldiers at the stations located in the Southern states. While there has been an improvement in general conditions, there is still great dissatisfaction and discouragement on the part of the colored people and the soldiers. They feel that, no matter how much they strive to meet War Department requirements, there is no change in the attitude of the War Department. The colored officers and soldiers feel that they are denied the protection and rewards that ordinarily result from good behavior and proper performance of duty.
3. Colored combat units, upon completion of training, have not been sent to theaters of operations. The enlisted personnel of two battalions of Field Artillery has been recently transferred to service units. The War Department, through Assistant Secretary McCloy, has stated that this was directed by military necessity. Somebody in the Department permitted this situation to develop. The personnel transferred from these Field Artillery units is reduced in morale. The commissioned and enlisted personnel left with the Field Artillery units can only look forward to another period of from 14 to 16 months of preparation. They can hardly hold out much hope for an opportunity for combat.
4. The 93<sup>rd</sup> Division has about completed the prescribed training. The disposition of this Division in the near future will have a great effect on the morale of the colored people. In the activation of new colored units, few commanding officers, if any, have been selected from the colored field officers. Some of those colored field officers have completed the courses at the service schools and have been serving in their present grades for long periods.
5. The press news items and reports of investigations show that there has been little change in the attitudes of civilian communities in Southern states. The colored man in uniform receives nothing but hostility from community officials. The attitude is still that of the Governors of six Southern states reported by General Cooke as a result of his inspections,

18 May to 20 June 1942. The colored man in uniform is expected by the War Department to develop a high morale in a community that offers him nothing but humiliation and mistreatment. Military training does not develop a spirit of cheerful acceptance of Jim-Crow laws and customs. The War Department has failed to secure for the colored soldier protection against violence on the part of civilian police and to secure justice in the courts in communities near-by to Southern stations. In the areas recently inspected, the colored soldier feels that he can secure justice in the civil courts. He has not been set upon by the civilian police. He has not been denied the privilege of occupying empty seats in public busses, street cars, etc. Taxicabs do serve him. This is not so in Southern communities.

6. On the training fields the development of morale does not take into consideration Jim-Crow laws and customs. The "Four Freedoms" cannot be enjoyed under Jim-Crow influences. Officers of the War Department General Staff have refused to attempt any remedial action to eliminate Jim-Crow. In fact, the Army, by its directives and by actions of commanding officers, has introduced the attitudes of the "Governors of the six Southern states" in many of the other 42 states of the continental United States.
7. I believe the time has come for the War Department to give some consideration to relieving the colored troops now located in the six Southern states referred to by General Cooke. Some consideration should be given to the replacement of white commanding officers by colored officers of proven ability--those who have met War Department requirements for promotion and assignments. Colored officers commanding colored units would go far toward insuring the confidence of the colored citizens in the fairness of the War Department. Unless something is done in the near future, the War Department in coming in for a great deal of criticism by the politicians in next year's political campaign.
8. I have always tried to be wholly impersonal in connection with the performance of my duties. I have at all times received the kindest consideration and cooperation from those with whom I have been associated. I have striven at all times to successfully accomplish the missions assigned to me. I am grateful for the privilege of contributing to the war effort. The Department can justify its failure to give me a promotion. The colored people only know the long time I have been in grade. I believe a promotion coming to me at this time, and a gradual relief of colored troops from Southern stations, and the assignment of colored officers of field grade to the command of colored units would go a long way toward inspiring confidence of colored people in the War Department.
9. May I take this opportunity to say that I am grateful for the consideration and interest you have displayed in my personal comforts and welfare. I feel that it would not be fair to you if I did not keep you informed of the trend of colored opinions. I ask your indulgence for the personal references.

B. O. DAVIS,  
Brigadier General,  
U.S. Army.

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Student Worksheet

**Directions:** As you read General Benjamin O. Davis's memo to the War Department, be sure to underline key words and phrases about the experiences of African Americans during WWII. Circle any words that you don't understand, and write the main idea of each paragraph in the left margin of the memo. Then, answer the following questions on this sheet.

NOTE: Some answers are found within the text; other answers require you to analyze the text and use your knowledge of the time period. If you use quotes, be sure to put quotation marks around them.

1. What is General Davis's impression of the African American ("colored") officers and soldiers in the north and northeast?
  
2. What is his impression of the African American officers and soldiers in the southeast?
  
3. To what does the general ascribe the differences? Use specific examples from the memo.
  
4. What evidence is there that African American troops want to enter combat against the enemy?
  
5. What are some overall concerns the general has regarding African American troops, all across the United States?
  
6. General Davis writes of "Jim-Crow laws and customs." To what is he referring? Look up this term if you do not know.
  
7. What solutions does the general suggest for increasing the morale and safety of African American troops?
  
8. What does he suggest for himself?
  
9. What do you think was the result of the general's memo? Was it effective? How can you find out?
  
10. Do you think that African Americans and other minorities in positions of power have a responsibility to campaign for minority rights, as the general did in his memo? Why or why not?
  
11. Do you think that other types of discrimination occur in the U.S. military today? Why or why not? Use examples to support your answer.



# AFRICAN AMERICANS IN WORLD WAR II

## *Fighting for a Double Victory*



African Americans served bravely and with distinction in every theater of World War II, while simultaneously struggling for their own civil rights at home. Although the United States Armed Forces were officially segregated until 1948, WWII laid the foundation for post-war integration of the military. When the U.S. entered the war in 1941, more than 2.5 million African Americans registered for the draft. By 1945, over 1 million African Americans would be serving in uniform on the Home Front, in Europe, and the Pacific (including thousands of African American women in the Women's auxiliaries).

During the war years, the segregation practices of civilian life spilled over into the military. The draft was segregated and more often than not African Americans were passed over by the all-white draft boards. Pressure from the NAACP led President Roosevelt to pledge that African Americans would be enlisted according to their percentage in the population. Although this percentage, 10.6%, was never actually attained in the services during the war, African American numbers grew dramatically in the Army, Navy, Army Air Force, Marine Corps, and the Coast Guard.

While most African Americans serving at the beginning of WWII were assigned to non-combat units and relegated to service duties, such as supply, maintenance, and transportation, their work behind front lines was equally vital to the war effort. Many drove for the famous "Red Ball Express," which carried a half million tons of supplies to the advancing First and Third Armies through France. By 1945, however, troop losses virtually forced the military to begin placing more African American troops into positions as infantrymen, pilots, tankers, medics, and officers in increasing numbers. In all positions and ranks, they served with as much honor, distinction, and courage as any American soldier did. Still, African American MPs stationed in the South often could not enter restaurants where their German prisoners were being served a meal.

On D-Day, the First Army on Omaha and Utah Beaches included nearly 2,000 African American troops. This number included a section of the 327<sup>th</sup> Quartermaster Service Company and the 320<sup>th</sup> Anti-Aircraft Barrage Balloon Battalion, which protected troops on the beach from aerial attack. Soon the all-black 761<sup>st</sup> Tank Battalion was fighting its way through France with Patton's Third Army. They spent 183 days in combat and were credited with capturing 30 major towns in France, Belgium, and Germany. For this, the 761<sup>st</sup> Tank Battalion received the Presidential Unit of Citation for "extraordinary heroism."

The Army Air Force also established several African American fighter and bomber groups. The famous "Tuskegee Airmen" of the 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group became part of the 15<sup>th</sup> Air Force, flying ground support missions over Anzio and escorting bombers on missions over Southern Italy. During the war, they flew over 1,500 missions. Bomber crews often requested to be escorted by these "Redtails," a nickname acquired from the painted tails of Tuskegee fighter planes. Approximately 150 Tuskegee Airmen died in training and in combat.

Stephen Ambrose identified the lamentable American irony of WWII, writing, "*The world's greatest democracy fought the world's greatest racist with a segregated army*" (Ambrose, *Citizen Soldier*). During the global conflict, African American leaders and organizations established the "Double V" campaign, calling for victory against the enemy overseas and victory against racism at home. This new black consciousness and the defiant rejection of unjustifiable racism planted important seeds for the post-War civil rights movement.

The National WWII Museum honors the contributions of African Americans in World War II.