



Fighting To Be Free

The double battle waged by African-Americans in the Armed Forces

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"Blacks were the only Americans who continually fought to serve in the military to prove their humanity. Ironically, they have had to die in order to live."

—Mary Berry and John Blasingame, authors of *Long Memory*—

African-Americans have fought and died in every major war involving the United States. During World War I, the legendary 369th Infantry from Harlem fought on the front lines for more than six months and became the most decorated unit in combat. In 1924, W.E.B. Du Bois talked about the "Double Battle" that black soldiers faced in his book *Gift of Black Folk*. The double battle refers to the fact that African-Americans fought bravely for their country even though they still faced blatant racism and segregation at home. African-Americans have always hoped that their patriotism on the war front would lead to equality on the home front, but that has not been the case. During the Persian Gulf Crisis, African-Americans have continued to fight for their country — the land of the free and the home of the brave.

The call for a cease-fire by the U.N. Security Council indicates that the worst part of the crisis is probably over. However, for African-Americans returning home, the ongoing battle against poverty, racism and discrimination has only just begun.

When examining the number of blacks in the military, it is easy to see that their numbers are disproportionate to their presence in the U.S. population. Some people question the reasoning behind the high number of blacks in the armed forces. The Brookings Institute in Washington, D.C., has conducted a study on blacks in the military. Their research shows that 40 percent of qualified blacks enter the military compared with only 14 percent of qualified whites. In other words, almost half of blacks who graduate from high school enter the military. In addition, blacks reenlist in the service at much higher rates than whites do.

Statistics released by the Pentagon also show the large black presence that exists in the U.S. armed forces. It is important to note that blacks fought in segregated units until President Harry Truman's executive order in 1948 integrated the armed services. In addition, recruitment of blacks to

the military did not begin until the Korean War, yet blacks comprise such a large proportion of the military population today. Twenty percent of the troops in the military are African-American, which is almost twice the amount of blacks in the general population. What is even more surprising is that about one-third or 40 percent of women in the military are also black. The breakdown of the military's main branches show that African-Americans comprise 30 percent of soldiers in the Army, 21 percent in the Navy, 17 percent in the Marines and 13.5 percent in the Air Force. When war comes, a disproportionate number of blacks may die because there are so many blacks in the military.

African-Americans characteristically have chosen the military as a means to uplift themselves. Although some blacks have advanced economically, the masses of black people remain in poverty. The military's benefits offer blacks a chance to escape poverty that exists in many black communities. The Rev. Joseph Lowery, executive director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, gave his own explanation for the high number of blacks in the military. "Many of them have been

drafted by the board of economic injustice, and they're seeking opportunities not available to them in civilian life."

In 1968, the Kerner Commission was appointed to study the

cause of race riots and the civil disorder that erupted after the death of Martin Luther King Jr. The commission concluded that the country was moving towards two nations that were separate and unequal, one black, one white. What the commission said some 23 years ago appears to have been correct. Economic statistics indicate that although blacks are not legally drafted, they do not fully volunteer for the military. Approximately one million black men don't have jobs or are chronically unemployed. The average black child can expect to spend 15 years of his life in poverty. Black children are three times more likely to be poor than white children. At least four million black children are poor in the country with at least two million African-American families living below the poverty level. Thirty-six percent of black fami-

lies are headed by women and some 87 percent of those families are poverty-stricken.

In addition to poverty, African-Americans may join the military because the masses of black people are socially disadvantaged. Statistics show that the black male is in trouble. Julian Bond, co-host of *American's Black Forum*, reports that a black man is more likely to die from violence than he was to die during a tour of duty in Vietnam. Of all black men in the age group 20-29, one in four is in prison, on probation, or on parole. Murder has replaced heart disease as the No. 1 killer of black men. For African-American males in the age group 15-24, homicide is the main enemy. In fact, black men have a one in 21 chance of dying before reaching age 25. The economic and social conditions blacks must endure have forced them to join the military to better their lives.

Blacks join the military to escape hardships and oppression, but often find that the military parallels the problems in the larger American society. African-Americans often find the military is not a mechanism for them to reach their goals. Blacks in general find it is difficult for them to work through the ranks of the military. Career advancement in the military for blacks is often a dream deferred. Tod Ensign, director of Citizen Soldier, has studied black pres-

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ence in the military. Ensign reports that the majority of blacks are over-represented in combat jobs and other low-paying and low-skill military jobs. Consequently, he says they are more likely than whites to be placed on the front lines during wartime. Ensign also said that blacks are underrepresented in the military's technical fields and in aviation jobs. Barriers no doubt exist that also keep blacks from reaching officer status. Of the 296,886 officers in the U.S. military, only seven percent are black. Gen. Colin Powell, the first black chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, is one of 33 blacks among the nation's 1,068 generals.

The lack of upward mobility in the military for African-Americans is compounded by the overall

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