



General Patton's Forgotten Troops: African American Soldiers in World War II in Their Own Words

This lesson plan was created by Paul LaRue and his students at Washington High School located in Washington Court House, Ohio. LaRue is in his 25th year as a high school social studies and history teacher. In 1998, Paul developed a Research History class; students in this class have submitted forty-five interviews with World War II veterans (half of these were African American) to the Library of Congress. LaRue has received numerous teaching awards as well a History Save OurHistory® grant. He can be reached at wshhistory@wchcs.org.

This lesson offers an excellent opportunity for teachers to bring diversity to their lesson plans and course units on World War II. African Americans, women, and soldiers from a broad range of ethnic backgrounds have served in the U.S. military throughout its history. This lesson allows students to learn more about the experience of African American soldiers, and to reflect upon their dedication to democracy and freedom, often against a background of discrimination and other challenges.



Mr. Harry Johns being interviewed by students in 2004.

Introduction

African Americans made up over one million of the more than 16 million U.S. men and women to serve in World War II.

Some of these men served in infantry, artillery, and tank units. As General George S. Patton Jr. swept across France into Germany, in his Third Army were African American combat units.

Harry Johns (a veteran of General Patton's army) sums up their service:

“African Americans served in every branch of service in a mandated segregated military. These men and women discharged their duties with great pride in the face of blatant discrimination and humiliation. The true story and history of their contributions both in combat units and in service units has yet to be included in the complete history of the Allied victory in World War II.

These men and women fought with great courage and faith in the promise of America. They did not despair of this country, for they believed in it and what it stood for.”

Teachers today deal with additional demands on their classroom time. Teaching diversity and a balanced picture of history can be challenging. This lesson provides teachers with the resources to introduce and explore a fascinating chapter in 20th century U.S. history. Teachers are also encouraged to help “Save Our History” by participating in the Library of Congress' Veterans History Project. By 2010 the Department of Veterans Affairs estimates there will be less than two million World War II veterans. It is not too late to help preserve this vanishing chapter of our history.

In 2003, my high school history students began interviewing World War II veterans for the Library of Congress' Veterans History Project. Among the veterans we have interviewed are several African Americans who served in Patton's army. Their stories are best told using their own words.



Students interview Mr. Buddie Branch in 2008.

How to Use This Lesson:

This lesson is a useful, one-day lesson that can be implemented while teaching diversity or WWII. These veterans and their stories demonstrate their courage and honor, while facing prejudice and discrimination.

Teaching Strategies:

The lesson can be used thematically or chronologically. The veterans stories, told in their own words, gives students a powerful primary source.

- 1.) Themes: (Found in edited transcripts)
 - a. Life in the Army in WWII
 - b. Discrimination
 - c. Contact with General Patton
 - d. Recognition for individual or unit activities
- 2.) Chronologically:
 - a. Follow the soldier's units across Europe (timeline)
 - b. Look at key events (e.g. D-Day, Bastogne, V-E Day) and where these soldiers units were located
- 3.) Combine themes and chronology:
 - a. Select a passage from their transcript and find the approximate location of the event.
- 4.) Combine the veteran's words with students watching segments of: First to Fight or Honor Deferred (use one page Veteran's Bios)

Teaching Tips:

- 1.) This makes a nice "Friday lesson".
- 2.) Perfect for Black History Month (but don't limit yourself to that)
- 3.) Start the lesson by asking students: What was the number of African Americans who served in WWII?
 - a. Answer: Over one million of the 16 million who served

-OR-

What was the baseball great Jackie Robinson's role in WWII?

Answer: Officer in the 761st Tank Battalion.

- 4.) Use the classroom edited veteran's transcripts. I have edited for length (4 pages) and organized chronologically for ease of use in the classroom.
- 5.) Make the discussion local; are there any WWII veterans in your community?
 - a. Students can identify best with people from their own community.
 - b. Fact: by 2020 the Dept. of Veterans Affairs estimates there will be 210,000 World War II veterans living.
- 6.) A great extension project is to invite one or several of these veterans into your classroom.
 - a. See Take a Veteran to School
<http://www.history.com/minisite.do?content_type=Minisite_Generic&content_type_id=54803&display_order=3&mini_id=54799>
- 7.) See additional Classroom Activities and Resources at the end of this lesson.
- 8.) Use veteran's one-page bios to encourage students to read their transcript edited or complete.



Reverend Howard Gray shares his story in my classroom in 2003.

Biography: Harry Johns



Born 1921, Alliance, OH
Served as a corporal in 999th Field Artillery

In 1945, there were approximately 240 field artillery battalions in Europe. Approximately eight of these battalions were composed of African Americans. The 999th Field Artillery was one of these African American battalions in Patton's Third Army. They manned an eight-inch Howitzer that could fire at 200 lb. Projectile up to 10 miles. In combat, this battalion fired approximately 22,200 rounds. Corporal Harry Johns was a member of the 999th Field Artillery battalion.

-Combat-

INTERVIEWER: Now, after you were shipped to France, you saw combat throughout this period?

VETERAN: Oh yes, yes, the whole period I was there. So when we were attached to Patton's Army, they began to plan the break – the fight – at St. Lo, which was big...the hold up. And we, the 999th, fired one of the first artillery barrages at the breakthrough. We called it the "Breakthrough at St. Lo", France. And we followed Patton all the way through France and all the way through Germany. And at one time we were in continuous combat for nine months and 22 days

INTERVIEWER: And so you were constantly on the move then?

VETERAN: Always constantly on the move, yes. We would settle in, – I don't really recall how long we stayed in each place – but once we knocked out the resistance in front of the troops, then we would move, and then the troops would move, you see that's the

way it worked. Sometimes we'd stay in a place pretty long, as I recall, because we'd dig foxholes and fix them up and put logs over them and that's where we stayed.

Harry Johns returned to Wilberforce University and completed an accounting degree. He then earned a masters degree in Business from Columbia University. Mr. Johns for thirty years served as Dean of the College of Business, controller and Vice President of Fiscal Affairs at Central State University. In 2004, Mr. Johns was one of the five African Americans to attend the 60th anniversary of D-Day in Normandy, France.

Biography: Reverend Howard Gray



Born 1924 Bloomingburg, OH
Served as Sgt. in the 3414 Quarter Master Truck Co.
(also known as “The Redball Express”)

The Redball Express was started in late August 1944 to supply Patton’s tanks with much needed fuel. Patton’s army used more than 380,000 gallons of gasoline per day. The Redball Express was a series of trucks (6,000 at its peak) that ran 24 hours a day for nearly two months. The route was nearly 400 miles long from St. Lo (near Normandy) to Patton’s army at the front. They delivered hundreds of tons of fuel and supplies to the tank unit. The Redball officially ended in November 1944, but these truck companies continued to haul supplies and men to the front during the winter of 1944 including the Battle of the Bulge. Roughly, 75% of the drivers were African American. Reverend Gray served as Sergeant in the 3414 QM. Truck Co. Redball Express.

-Bastogne-

INTERVIEWER: What happened at the Battle of the Bulge?

VETERAN: Bastogne, Battle of the Bulge...So we got a call to . . . nighttime . . . cold . . . and to go up and to get them out of there . . . what was remained. So, I took my twelve trucks and I was one to lead the convoy to Bastogne. When we got into Bastogne a lieutenant in a jeep uh . . . came out and caught me . . . said, “Sergeant, you stay here and guide these trucks into Bastogne. And when one gets up and get loaded, then send the other truck in. And don’t leave the post!” I said, “Yes, sir.” And I stayed there outside

of Bastogne sending one truck in. And when the last truck came, they said, "Come on, sergeant. You better come on in there!" Said, "The Germans are still gonna bomb." I said, "I can't." I had to stick to or I would be killed. Honest to truth. I had to stay there, and I did by the grace of God. I stayed there until my last truck came out, and I boarded that truck. That was Bastogne...And we brought 'em out of there. What . . . what was left.

Reverend Howard Gray returned to Ohio and worked at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base for 33 years. Upon retirement, he drove a school bus for the Washington City Schools for 8 years. He has twice given the Commencement address at Washington High School. He has preached for 48 years. Rev. Gray was a featured speaker at "Take a Veteran to School Day" in 2007.

Biography: Buddie Branch



Born 1925 Dayton, OH
Served as a corporal in the 761st tank Battalion
Awarded the Bronze Star

The 761st Tank Battalion was one of a small number of African American tank units. The 761st was the first group of African American tankers to reach France. Assigned to Patton's 3rd Army, the 761st saw heavy combat as they moved across France and Germany. Nearly 50 members of the Battalion were decorated for bravery in combat. Corporal Buddie Branch was one of the men.

-Bravery-

INTERVIEWER: Tell us about your Bronze Star?

VETERAN: It was in November around town, called Honskirch, France. The platoon was ordered to move forward after the infantry arrived. The four tanks stayed on road because there could be mines in the field. And so, we sit in the first town, we sit there, waiting. The Germans, being dug in like they were, they knocked the first tank out and it was on fire, burning. They disabled the last one and blocked the road, the other two were blocked in. So, the other two tanks in front of ours, one of them went across a field burning (sighs). I mean, knowing your men are in there burning up is kind of a ... something you'll never forget. And that's why a lot of people don't like to talk about stuff that happened. But the second tank was on fire and the last one was on fire. And our tank had been hit in the turret and it jammed the turret pointing to the right, that I ...

and we didn't know why but it did. We couldn't turn it and so we, the tank commander had been hit with a piece of shrapnel. I got up and directed driver back the tank around the disabled tank. And we got behind a barn. That's when, then I got out and went down to try and help some of the men that got out of the other disabled tank. For that I got a Bronze Star.

***Bronze Star Citation :**

Buddie V. Branch, 35873752, Corporal, Infantry, Company "B", 761st Tank Battalion, APO 655, U.S. Army, for heroic achievement in action against the enemy on 25 November 1944, in Honskirch, France. Corporal Branch, after having established covering fire for seventeen walking casualties, voluntarily dismounted from his tank, and with utter disregard for his personal safety, distinguished himself by courageous bravery in the face of heavy enemy fire. Corporal Branch succeeded in inspecting six disabled tanks, aided in the removal and evacuation of seven litter cases, carrying each one back approximately three hundred yards to shelters, while enemy 88mm guns, mortars, machine guns, and snipers continued to fire upon the disabled tank column for a period of four and one half hours. Corporal Branch's courage and devotion to duty is an inspiration to all. Entered military service from Dayton, Ohio.

Buddie Branch returned to Dayton to complete his senior year in high school. He then graduated from the Cincinnati College of Embalming. Buddie worked at Wright Patterson Air Force base for 32 years. Buddie now works part time as a funeral director. Buddie as one of a very small number of African Americans who were decorated for bravery in World War II; he has received numerous awards and recognitions.

Timeline in Europe 1944-1945

Landing Normandy, France

<u>Soldier:</u>	<u>Place/Activity:</u>	<u>Date:</u>
Harry Johns	Land on Utah Beach	July 18, 1944
Howard Gray	Land on Utah Beach	September 8, 1944
Buddie Branch	Land on Omaha Beach	October 10, 1944

Early Action

<u>Soldier:</u>	<u>Place/Activity:</u>	<u>Date:</u>
Harry Johns	Flacourt, France Battalion fired over 2,000 rounds	August 19-23
Howard Gray	Verdun, France Convoy 46 truckloads of ammunition from Utah Beach to Verdun	September 18-22
Buddie Branch	Morville, France Tanks encountered heavy enemy artillery and mortar fire	November 9

Bastogne Area December 1944

<u>Soldier:</u>	<u>Place/Activity:</u>	<u>Date:</u>
Harry Johns	Vicinity of Bastogne;	December 22

Moved to Colmar Pocket

Howard Gray	Vicinity of Bastogne; Transported wounded troops out of the combat zone	December 1944
Buddie Branch	Vicinity of Bastogne; Shelling enemy positions	December 1944

V-E Day

<u>Soldier:</u>	<u>Place/Activity:</u>	<u>Date:</u>
Harry Johns	Dijon; Recently completed Battle of Bordeaux; Fought pockets of German resistance	May 1945
Howard Gray	Pilsen, Czechoslovakia; 40-truck convoy of gasoline	May 9, 1945
Buddie Branch	Enns River; 761 st tanks meet Russian Army	May 6, 1945

Activities

- 1.) Have students read the three veterans' stories:
 - a.) Ask students to identify similarities and differences in the soldier's stories.
 - b.) How were these veterans' stories different from what you have seen on T.V. and in the movies?
 - c.) Have student's select a single memory from one of the transcript and journal about how the story makes them feel.
- 2.) Show the DVD First to Fight or Honored Deferred:
 - a.) Ask the students to compare the information from the DVD to the stories from the transcripts looking for details.
- 3.) Ask students to reflect on these veteran's and their stories:
 - 2.) Patriotism, life in the service, and discrimination.
 - 3.) Why we don't hear more about these men?
 - 4.) Why did no African American soldier receive the Medal of Honor during WWII?
- 4.) Have students select and research one of the following topics:
 - a.) 761st Tank Battalion.
 - b.) Red Ball Express
 - c.) African American World War II Medal of Honor winners.
 - d.) Segregation of the military in WWII
 - e.) Jackie Robinson's WWII service.
 - f.) Life of General George S. Patton Jr.
- 5.) Read the entire transcripts of the veterans at
http://www.history.com/minisite.do?content_type=Minisite_Generic&content_type_id=54803&display_order=3&mini_id=54799.
- 6.) Save Our History
 - a.) Identify a local WWII veteran and interview them about their service.
-see information and tips at:
http://www.history.com/minisites/veterans/guides/oralhistory_sample2008.pdf.

Resources

A.) DVD/Video from The History Channel:

- 1.) First to Fight: The Black Tankers of World War II: Story of the 761st.
- 2.) Honor Deferred: Inspiring stories of African American heroes of WWII.
- 3.) Port Chicago Mutiny

B.) Online: Save Our History Resources:

1.) Take a Vet to School:

http://www.history.com/minisite.do?content_type=Minisite_Generic&content_type_id=54803&display_order=3&mini_id=54799

A great source for information and classroom activities.

2.) The Library of Congress' Veterans History Project

<http://www.loc.gov/vets/>

Features the impressive collection of first person narratives collected through this initiative.

3.) National Archives and Records Administration

www.archives.gov and for general inquiry email inquire@nara.gov

A massive amount of World War II records.

4.) Lest We Forget...: African Americans in World War II

<http://www.coax.net/people/lwf/WW2.HTM>

Great collection of material and websites on African American in World War II

C.) Books:

- 1.) Anderson, T.W. Come Out Fighting: The Epic Tale of the 761st Tank Battalion 1942-1945.
- 2.) Abdul-Jabbar, Kareem. Brothers in Arms: The Epic Story of the 761st Tank Battalion, WWII's Forgotten Heroes.
- 3.) Sasser, Charles (2005). Patton's Panthers: The 761st Tank Battalion in World War II.