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## CHAPTER SEVEN

PROTEST AND DISABILITY: A NEW LOOK AT  
AFRICAN AMERICAN SOLDIERS DURING THE  
FIRST WORLD WAR

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In 1919, W.E.B. Du Bois penned an editorial for *The Crisis* entitled “Returning Soldiers” in which he urged black veterans of the First World War to make their dismal encounters with unrelenting racism in the wartime army count by taking up the cause of civil rights. “We return, We return from fighting, We return fighting,” Du Bois wrote.<sup>1</sup> Nearly every discussion of black soldiers’ experiences uses Du Bois’s exhortation to explain the mood of this disillusioned generation of black veterans who injected a more insistent and militant tone into the postwar civil rights movement. This widely accepted narrative connects the individual wartime suffering of soldiers in a racist American army to veterans’ postwar collective political activism. Examination of black soldiers’ political agitation within the army and their struggles with disability afterwards suggests that this traditional account offers too limited a view of African American soldiers’ experiences and the significance of the war for the civil right movement.

Rather than waiting until they left the army to begin their fight for civil rights, many of the 380,000 African American soldiers who served during the First World War engaged in that struggle from the moment that they put on the uniform.<sup>2</sup> Black soldiers staged work slowdowns, ignored orders restricting their contact with French civilians, challenged white authority openly, wrote individual letters of protest, and signed petitions in collective efforts to better their

<sup>1</sup> Du Bois (May 1919).

<sup>2</sup> For examples, see Barbeau and Henri (1974), Ellis (2001), Schneider (2002). The one exception to this trend is analysis of the mutiny by black regular army troops in Houston in August, 1917 which recognizes the determination of these uniformed troops to take a stand against Jim Crow. Haynes (1976).

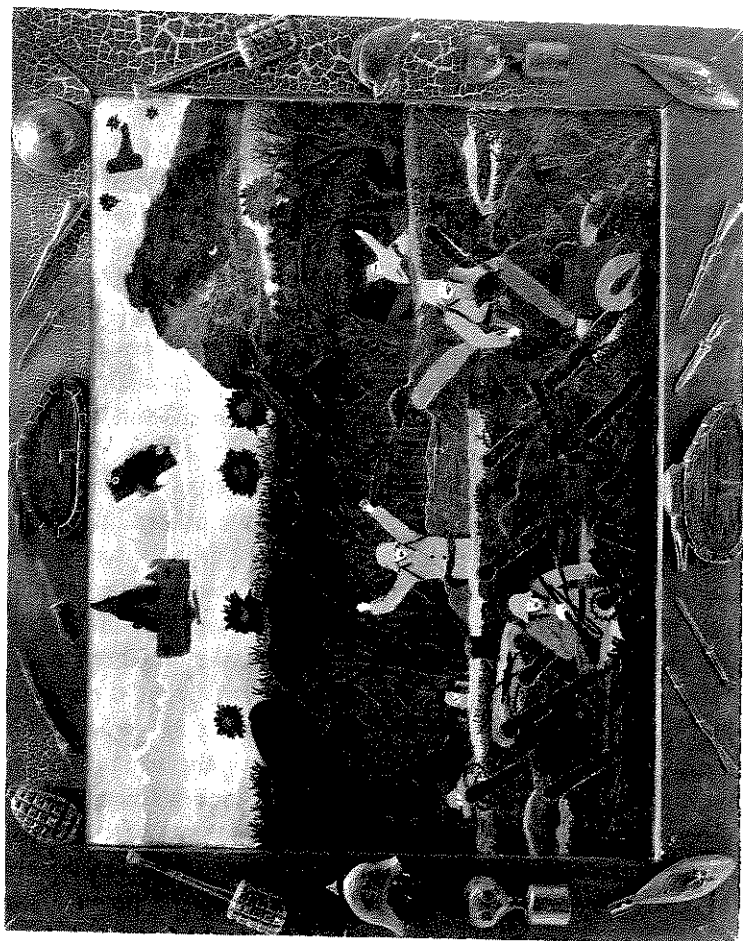


Fig. 3. "The End of the War: Starting Home", Horace Pippin, 1930-33. Philadelphia Museum of Art (Gift of Robert Carlen, 1941).

conditions within the military.<sup>3</sup> The bulk of letters went to Emmett J. Scott (the secretary of Tuskegee Institute who served as a special assistant to the secretary of war during the war), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and various black newspapers. President Woodrow Wilson, General John J. Pershing, and Secretary of War Newton E. Baker also received notes from troops in the field. The poor spelling and grammar revealed the grade-school education of many who wrote. The army had expected little complaint from these African Americans, many of them life-long southerners accustomed to Jim Crow and manual labor. Yet instead of accepting the unbroken thread of discrimination and prejudice that connected their civilian and military lives, these soldiers chose to take a stand against white supremacy. In the army, southern sharecroppers discovered a chance to join northern factory workers and college-educated professionals in the fight for equal rights.

Scott's normal practice was to forward the letters of complaint that he received from stateside troops to the Military Intelligence Division (MID) for investigation. MID sometimes instructed camp authorities to handle the investigation themselves and report their findings to Washington, D.C. Other times, MID sent their only black investigator, Major Walter Loving, to gather a firsthand account of the situation. One MID official warned Scott that "there is a possible danger here, in that the individual may receive rather harsh treatment from some of his superior officers when they discover that he has been writing letters of complaint to Washington." After all, this official continued, "one can understand that an officer might feel some resentment in such a case."<sup>4</sup> Many soldiers understood the risk that they were taking by complaining, and consequently the vast majority sent their letters anonymously, used aliases, or asked their correspondents to protect their identities. Private Nelson Dukes decided to sign his second letter to the NAACP, but asked the secretary to send any reply in a plain envelope.<sup>5</sup> "I know I am taking chances in signing my name here," Private Harold W. Coleman wrote in his

<sup>3</sup> For a complete discussion of work slowdowns and African American soldiers' relationships with the French, see Keene (2001a, 53, 126-30) and Keene (2001b).

<sup>4</sup> Perkins (September 26, 1918).

<sup>5</sup> Dukes (March 16, 1919).

letter, “yet I believe it is for a good cause.”<sup>6</sup> In Camp Alexander, Virginia, authorities resolved to squash the flow of embarrassing revelations making their way to Washington by taking handwriting samples from all the literate men in one battalion and comparing them with the letters of complaint. Investigators could only clearly identify one man, and were pleased to report that the man denied writing a letter and “states that he has no complaint to make, that he never had better treatment, never lived better, nor never ate better than since he has been in the Army.”<sup>7</sup> Escaping discovery may have protected the letter-writer, but army authorities often conveniently concluded that they could take no action without a specific witness to interrogate.

Overseas, soldiers also found ways to voice their discontent, and often paid a price for protesting openly. “Colonel [Glendie] Young, tried, rather unsuccessfully, to keep colored officers from going to the town of Bar-le-Duc for serious drinking and womanizing,” First Lieutenant Rayford Logan recalled, one of 1200 blacks holding commissions during the war.<sup>8</sup> Upon hearing that Young “had drafted an order to the French people telling them that the [French] women were not to associate with us,” Logan decided to take the most serious step of writing a letter to General John J. Pershing to complain that Young was unfit to command and to ask for a transfer.<sup>9</sup> “One of my old friends at Regimental Headquarters told me that Colonel Young’s endorsement [on the letter] to be forwarded to General Pershing labeled me a ‘troublemaker, agitator,’ as I was indeed,” Logan proudly recalled.<sup>10</sup> When it came time to reassign Logan after he suffered a head injury in battle, the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) General Headquarters (GHQ) punished him for writing this letter by assigning him to the quartermaster corps near Bordeaux rather than returning him to his unit along the front. Logan now left the ranks of the 38,000 blacks who served in overseas combatant units to share the fate of the rest of the 200,000 black soldiers in France who spent the war working, not fighting. Overall, black troops made up approximately 1/3rd of the wartime

<sup>6</sup> Coleman (undated).

<sup>7</sup> Taylor (December 22, 1918).

<sup>8</sup> Logan (undated) Autobiography.

<sup>9</sup> Logan (June 19, 1943).

<sup>10</sup> Logan (undated) Autobiography.

army’s laboring units at home and 3% of its combat forces, although they were 13% of the entire army population.<sup>11</sup>

Black soldiers who protested in person, rather than through the mail, had no way to shield their identity, and risked arrests or beatings from military police, demotions, and company punishments for challenging discriminatory policies. When Sergeant Harrison Washington complained to the camp commander about the “Whites Only” signs outside latrines in Camp Upton, New York, the signs were removed but Sergeant Washington was demoted for disobeying his company commander’s order to take his complaint first to the camp detachment adjutant.<sup>12</sup> A sergeant in Camp Alexander, Virginia who reported a white officer for yelling racial obscenities at his men was arrested for trying to incite mutiny among black troops.<sup>13</sup>

There were, therefore, repercussions for soldiers who complained to authorities. At the same time, however, black soldiers faced fewer risks than black civilians who violated the racial status quo. Unless black soldiers actually took the lives of whites, as during the Houston soldiers’ mutiny in August, 1917, they were in a better position than southern black civilians to question or test the rules of acceptable conduct established by white America. First Lieutenant Charles Houston, for example, recalled a night in Vannes, France when four white officers and a group of white enlisted men arrived at the town square determined to lynch him and three other black officers. Houston wrote,

The officer who led the mob began to yelp about ‘niggers’ forgetting themselves just because they had a uniform on, and it was time to put ‘a few in their places,’ otherwise the United States would not be a safe place to live in after they get back. The enlisted men were milling around us. None offered us any violence, possibility because it is a most serious offense in the Army for an enlisted man to strike an officer, and these men were not sure they could get away with it.<sup>14</sup>

Houston and his comrades took advantage of their hesitation to argue that as officers they would not have anything to do with the enlisted

<sup>11</sup> Keene (2002).

<sup>12</sup> Memorandum for Scott (April 30, 1919).

<sup>13</sup> Henderson (December 18, 1918).

<sup>14</sup> Houston (September 28, 1940).

men, but if the officers wanted a fair fight of four against four, they were game. The exchange grew more heated with the whites claiming they would not lower themselves by fighting “niggers” and the blacks countering that the white officers were cowards. A white captain from the military police finally arrived to lecture the officers “on disgracing the uniform in a public brawl and ordered us back to our hotels,” Houston recalled. It is hard to imagine a group of aroused working-class whites hesitating to attack middle-class black professional men because they feared serious repercussions from the civilian criminal justice system.

Civilian lynch mobs during the war killed 36 and 60 African Americans in 1917 and 1918, respectively, including several black soldiers home on leave. Only one charge of an intra-military lynching, however, ever surfaced. During a postwar Congressional investigation into alleged executions without trial by military authorities in France (an action that Pershing had authorized if needed to maintain order during battle) Philip Bell stepped forward to make an unsubstantiated charge that marines had lynched a black man for having a white French girlfriend.<sup>15</sup> In this particular case, Bell, who was himself returning from a date with a French woman, testified that he never reported to incident out of fear that he might “git [sic] the same thing.” The Senate and, it appears, even the NAACP had serious doubts about the veracity of Bell’s claim. At a time when the NAACP was organizing a massive publicity campaign to support federal anti-lynching legislation, Bell’s assertion went unmentioned or investigated by the organization. Even if Bell’s claim was true, the record of one known intra-military lynching as compared to 96 civilian mob killings suggests that the military was a safer place than civilian society to challenge the racial status quo.

Confrontations with white soldiers, letter-writing, and filing formal complaints did little to change segregationist army policies, however. Yet through their protests black soldiers preserved their self-respect and manhood, laid the groundwork for postwar activism and succeeded in keeping army officials on edge throughout the war. White authorities were keenly aware of the detrimental effect that racial

<sup>15</sup> Special Committee on Alleged Executions Without Trial in France (1923). For Pershing’s policy on battlefield executions, see Keene (2001a).

unrest could have on the war effort. Most only wanted to keep black soldiers from causing trouble and ordered black soldiers again and again to ignore violations of their civil rights. General Charles Ballou, who commanded the Fort Des Moines Officers Training Camp held for black volunteers in the summer of 1917 and the all-black 92nd combat division, found occasion to warn each group to stay out of public establishments where they were not wanted. In the summer of 1917, a group of officer candidates refused to leave a Chinese restaurant in Des Moines, Iowa. Despite the fact that Iowa had a civil rights law prohibiting discrimination in public restaurants, Ballou told the men the next day that “he expected us to vindicate our friends and justify the decision to make the experiment of training Negroes as officers by staying out of any place where our presence, right or wrong, might cause friction,” one officer candidate reported.<sup>16</sup> Months later, Ballou issued an even stronger warning to members of the 92nd Division when a black sergeant demanded admittance to a white-owned movie theater near Fort Funston, Kansas. “White men made the division,” Ballou thundered. “And they can break it just as easily if it becomes a troublemaker.”<sup>17</sup> Other white commanders issued similar orders. While stationed in Newport News, Virginia, Rayford Logan witnessed black soldiers from the 370th Regiment disregard the town’s practice of segregating streetcars.<sup>18</sup> Logan, a first lieutenant in the 372nd Regiment, recalled that his commanding officer “sternly ordered us to obey local laws and warned that we would be held responsible for violations by the soldiers under our command.” After this meeting, Logan lost his zeal for bayoneting dummies of German soldiers in training camp exercises, and began instead to burn with the desire to strike back against white America. “When black officers taught black men bayonet practice they usually substituted the picture of the rabid white southerner for that of the Hun,” claimed the ex-servicemen editors of the radical newspaper *The Messenger* after the war. “This method often inspired the soldier with the necessary dash and form,” *The Messenger* asserted.<sup>19</sup>

Like countless other soldiers, Logan waged his own private war

<sup>16</sup> Houston (July 27, 1940).

<sup>17</sup> Keene (2001a, 66).

<sup>18</sup> Logan (undated, Autobiography, 5).

<sup>19</sup> *The Messenger* (August 1919).

against prejudice, even though it would have often been easier to simply ignore the insults. After hearing a white officer berate a black stevedore for mishandling some supplies, Logan threatened to prefer charges against the officer for conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman. On several other occasions, Logan interrupted racially offensive conversations overheard in camps or hospitals with curse-laden tirades of his own. "Soon after my arrival in the Bordeaux area, it was bruited about that there was a colored officer who made enlisted men salute them. When they saw me approaching, they turned to gaze in the display windows of stores or looked up at to view an airplane that generally was not there. I would stop and look in the windows or up in the air. Sheepishly, they saluted me," Logan recalled.<sup>20</sup> Because of his actions, Logan "became very popular with the colored soldiers," who began to ask Logan to defend them in courts martial.<sup>21</sup>

Finding the strength to protest did not just depend, however, on individual resolve. Many soldiers discovered the possibility and effectiveness of collective action during the war. Thrust together from morning to night, exposed to an army culture that placed a premium on physical expressions of masculinity and surrounded by the wartime rhetoric of democracy, these young and hardy young men turned their units into places where daily racial insults were rehashed and proposals for a united stand bore fruit. When the men training as officers in Fort Des Moines heard that their graduation would be delayed for a month because the army was not sure what to do with them, they quickly formed an association that sent two representatives to meet with Secretary of War Baker, organized a letter-writing campaign to Washington, and worked with the NAACP to keep the pressure on the War Department to graduate and commission them.<sup>22</sup> On the ship carrying them to France, Logan's commanding officer told his black officers that he expected them to sit separately from white officers at an evening concert. "I assembled a group of colored officers on deck and told them that any one who attended the show was a damn fool and ought to be thrown overboard," Logan later recalled. One of the enlisted men performing for the

<sup>20</sup> Logan (undated, Autobiography, 31).

<sup>21</sup> Logan (June 18, 1943).

<sup>22</sup> Gregory (1917).

officers that night "told me some years later that they were delighted by the absence of the vast majority."<sup>23</sup>

It was little surprise that black officers, having already defied white America by attending college and preparing to lead men in battle, immediately mobilized their ranks to attack discriminatory policies. For working class blacks, however, especially those from the south, military service may have offered a unique opportunity to engage in collective political action. "Most of them," wrote one correspondent in describing the soldiers in his unit to Scott, "are illiterates and inclined to be afraid of speaking up for their rights but grumble among themselves."<sup>24</sup> This grumbling was given direction by this soldier from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, who got the men to sign statements about their poor treatment and convinced them to offer to pay the expenses for an investigator to come and inspect conditions in Camp Humphreys, Virginia. The continuous stream of letters that "are all to the same effect" from certain camps indicated to Emmett Scott that "there must be something radically wrong with conditions at a camp where the men so uniformly complain of harsh and brutal treatment."<sup>25</sup> The similarity of these complaints may also, however, reveal organized letter-writing campaigns among the troops in which soldiers resolved to use whatever political clout they could muster to replace their officers, improve their material conditions, or secure transfers from labor to combatant organizations.

Many letters from black soldiers complained about poor food and inadequate housing, but Secretary of War Baker was particularly struck by the "continued complaints coming to the War Department with reference to a number of colored soldiers who have been bodily assaulted by their superior officers."<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the behavior and demeanor of their white non-commissioned officers and officers often determined what being in the army meant for black soldiers. "We were drafted and given an understanding from our Local Boards that we were to be soldiers to help to win the war," Private George Canada wrote from Waco, Texas. Instead, black soldiers were "taken

<sup>23</sup> Logan (undated, Autobiography, 7-8).

<sup>24</sup> Unsigned letter (September 3, 1918).

<sup>25</sup> Memorandum for General E.L. Munson (November 23, 1918). Camp Humphreys, Va. (undated).

<sup>26</sup> Baker (July 25, 1918).

out to work under gun just like we are convicts."<sup>27</sup> Another soldier stationed in Camp Jackson, South Carolina wrote Scott, "the lieut [sic] and Capt. walk about on the drill field with a whip in his hand like the boys were convicts on state farm."<sup>28</sup> For these troops, working on labor details and drilling resembled life on a chain gang. Other soldiers complained that in some southern camps white officers had resumed the role of plantation overseers.<sup>29</sup> "Green white men who is [sic] vastly inferior to some of our own negro boys are broght [sic] in and placed over them, not in the capacity of soldier sear gents [sic] but as slave drivers . . .," one soldier wrote to Scott from Camp Jackson, South Carolina. "Willingly will we sacrifice our lives for our country as thousands of our brothers are doing on the Flanders battle fields [sic], But in return We ask for a mans chance not to be led about by white sear gents [sic] as if we were slaves."<sup>30</sup> Another group of men from the same camp signed a letter of protest proclaiming "we came into this army to defend our country and its people, and not to be use as slave[s]."<sup>31</sup> The allusion to slavery was everywhere. A soldier from Camp Devens, Massachusetts began his letter to Scott by asking, is it "the intention of the War Department to make slaves of us or Soldiers?"<sup>32</sup> Another enlisted man echoed the feelings of his comrades when he wondered in a letter to the NAACP "why is it that we can not be treated like men if not soldiers."<sup>33</sup>

Few black soldiers went beyond writing letters of complaints about their officers, because, as Houston observed, attacking an officer was a serious offense in the army. Individual brawls, street fighting and outright rioting between white and black enlisted troops, however, was common.<sup>34</sup> Unsure of how safe they were in the presence of racist white troops and armed military police, some black soldiers resolved to defend themselves with arms if necessary. Black soldiers stationed at Langley Field, Virginia, for instance, carried illegal arms

<sup>27</sup> Canada (November 25, 1918).

<sup>28</sup> Anonymous letter (October 20, 1918).

<sup>29</sup> Anonymous letter (November 26, 1918).

<sup>30</sup> Soldier (August 27, 1918).

<sup>31</sup> Letters from soldiers of the 19th Regiment (November, 1918).

<sup>32</sup> Anonymous letter (September 28, 1918).

<sup>33</sup> Anonymous letter (November 14, 1918).

<sup>34</sup> Keene (2001a, 89–98).

"for their own protection."<sup>35</sup> White authorities in Bordeaux regularly searched the barracks and belongings of black stevedores for weapons. Despite these precautions, "some of our soldiers had retained guns that they had purchased in Bordeaux," a black officer recalled. One evening, a white entertainer uttered the word "nigger" during a theater performance staged for black soldiers, prompting the audience to rise to its feet shouting "everybody out." In the ensuing melee, a rock hit a military policeman who responded by firing into the crowd, but instead of scattering to their barracks, black troops "returned the fire."<sup>36</sup> According to Logan, the troops were not punished for this incident, perhaps out of concern of provoking an even more violent response from secretly armed black troops.

In a few instances, black combatant troops received the support of their white officers to fight back. In Camp Meade, Maryland, the 351st Field Artillery heard that white troops were planning to attack them because the under-supplied black troops had helped themselves to some of the white unit's coal. "That afternoon Colonel Cole of the 351st paraded his men and told them he expected them to stay in their area but that if anybody attacked them he expected them to defend themselves," veteran Charles Houston recalled. "The white troops never showed up, the incident blew over; but the men of the 351st never forgot that Colonel Cole had stood by them," Houston noted.<sup>37</sup> In Camp Whitman, New York, the 369th Regiment encountered an Alabama regiment that chafed at the presence of black combatant troops in their midst. "Early one afternoon, I learned that the Alabamians intended to attack us during the night," Captain Hamilton Fish recalled in his memoirs. "For our defense, I had to borrow ammunition from another New York regiment, as we had none. After arming our soldiers, I and my fellow officers told them that if they were attacked, they were to fight back; if they were fired on, they were to fire back."<sup>38</sup> When a bugle sounded at midnight to alert the men that the Alabama regiment was approaching, Fish ran out to warn the unit's officers that his men were armed, information that persuaded them to call off the attack. The combative

<sup>35</sup> Intelligence Office Headquarters (November 5, 1918).

<sup>36</sup> Logan (undated, Autobiography, 36).

<sup>37</sup> Houston (August 10, 1940).

<sup>38</sup> Fish H. (1991, 26–27).

spirit of the 369th continued when they got to France. In their old age, some veterans of the 369th Infantry Regiment claimed that after white Marines in St. Nazaire killed some members of their unit, they retaliated by taking the lives of the murderers. Official records do not corroborate this tale of bloodletting between white and black American troops, citing only disease as the cause of death for the few members of the 369th who died in St. Nazaire.<sup>39</sup> Even if only apocryphal, these stories of retaliatory vengeance reveal that black troops considered fighting back the only honorable course of action when confronted with overt physical threats to their safety.

For many, these stands against racism and discrimination within the military served as a crucial launch pad for a lifetime of activism. After the war, Logan stayed in France and helped arrange several postwar Pan-African conferences. Later, upon his return to the United States, he became a scholar of black history and helped organize voter registration drives and A. Philip Randolph's aborted March on Washington in 1941. Charles Houston would go on to spearhead the NAACP's legal campaign against segregation in public schools.<sup>40</sup> Houston's decision to dedicate his life to the civil rights movement came after a general court martial wrongly convicted a black sergeant of fighting on a train when he had actually been the one who broke up the fight. "The Colonel was not interested in evidence, he wanted to teach the regiment a lesson out of this affair," Houston later wrote. Watching the once-proud man shuffle through the camp in blue work overalls under a white guard as he served his sentence of hard labor, Houston decided "that if luck was with me and I got through this war, I would study law and use my time fighting for men who could not strike back."<sup>41</sup> Houston now believed that "my battleground was America, not France."<sup>42</sup> Ex-servicemen like Houston

<sup>39</sup> Harris (2003, 160).

<sup>40</sup> In 1941 on the eve of the American entry into World War II, A. Philip Randolph organized a march on Washington, D.C. to protest racial discrimination in the defense industry and the armed forces that promised to send nearly 25,000 African Americans to the nation's capital. To avoid this political embarrassment, President Franklin D. Roosevelt in the week before the scheduled march negotiated with Randolph to call off the planned demonstration in return for a presidential directive banning discrimination in wartime defense industries and establishing the Fair Employment Practices Committee to investigate complaints.

<sup>41</sup> Houston (September 7, 1940).

<sup>42</sup> Houston (August 24, 1940).

flocked to join the NAACP, which saw its membership rolls explode from 9,200 members in 1918 to over 62,000 in 1919.<sup>43</sup>

Other veterans returned with less faith in exacting change through the existing legal or political system and joined radical organizations like Marcus Garvey's black nationalist United Negro Improvement Association or took to the streets in postwar racial riots. The rhetoric or act of fighting back was nothing new for these men, but instead represented a continuation of their determination from the opening days of the war to stand up for their rights. New, short-lived organizations and newspapers established for black veterans, such as the League for Democracy and its paper, *The Commoner*, actively encouraged black veterans to "fight. Be proud. Be aggressive. Fight."<sup>44</sup>

Even in the south, examples of militant action or collective organizing by veterans were widespread in 1919. In July, 1919, ex-servicemen put their military training to good use when they fought back with guns against a rampaging white mob in Washington, D.C. In Birmingham, Alabama, a streetcar conductor murdered a black sergeant, and his fellow veterans offered a \$250 reward for the arrest of the conductor.<sup>45</sup> Former black soldiers also actively participated in a grassroots effort to organize a sharecroppers union in Phillips County, Arkansas, a movement that federal troops and white vigilantes brutally suppressed in a massacre that left 250 sharecroppers dead.<sup>46</sup> *The Veteran*, a paper published by the radical National Colored Soldiers and Citizens Council, kept veterans informed of racial abuses throughout the country, taking special aim at the south. "This paper [is] virtually an agent for 'direct action' against the oppressors of the negroes in the South," wrote Robert A. Bowen, urging that the Postmaster General ban the publication from the mails under the provisions of the Espionage Act of 1917.<sup>47</sup> Bowen was not far off the mark. In one story about the brutal beating by a southern landowner of two sharecroppers, *The Veteran* quoted a returned soldier as remarking, "We offered our lives to save this country and we are willing to give our lives for our rights. We hope this will not be necessary. We do not want war. But they are beating Colored women and

<sup>43</sup> Schneider (2002, 17).

<sup>44</sup> Ellis (2001, 225).

<sup>45</sup> Schneider (2002, 35).

<sup>46</sup> Reich (1996).

<sup>47</sup> Bowen (June 26, 1919).

children every day and if something isn't done about it we shall be forced to fight."<sup>48</sup>

The collision between postwar black assertiveness and white hostility to any collective or individual effort to challenge the racial status quo unleashed a wave of racial violence in the second part of 1919 that included 25 racial riots and an upsurge in lynching. Violent suppression of the southern civil rights movement accelerated in the early twenties, fueled partly by widespread fears that well-trained and militant black veterans were making good on their threat to fight back against prejudice and discrimination. From a 1919 high of 7,700 members in its Texas branch, NAACP rolls dropped to fewer than 1,100 by 1921 after state-sponsored intimidation and harassment forced most branches to disband or go underground.<sup>49</sup> The same pattern was repeated in Georgia and Mississippi.

This worsening racial environment limited opportunities for southern veterans to join civil rights organizations or express their dissatisfaction through non-violent means. Veterans continued to fight back sporadically, most notably during the Tulsa race riot of 1921 when black ex-servicemen put on their old army uniforms in a heroic attempt to defend the black town of Greenwood against a deputized mob and the National Guard.<sup>50</sup> Although most of Greenwood burned to the ground and many lost their lives, veterans' willingness to fight back was one factor that contributed to a decline in lynching throughout the twenties.<sup>51</sup>

In Tulsa, veterans faced the predicament eloquently articulated by the poet Claude McKay, "If we must die, let it not be like hogs, Hunted and penned in an inglorious sport. Like men we'll face the murderous pack, Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back."<sup>52</sup> Countless other veterans faced a somewhat different dilemma. Throughout the history of the civil rights movement, many activists discovered that their involvement was episodic, dependent on a host of

<sup>48</sup> *The Veteran* (June 28, 1919).

<sup>49</sup> Reich (1996).

<sup>50</sup> Brophy (2002, 32, 41-42, 50-51).

<sup>51</sup> Schneider (2002, 192) also traces the decline of lynching to continued northern migration of needed workers, a stable economic climate that decreased confrontations between tenants and landlords, the growing availability of radio that provided alternative means of mass entertainment, and the NAACP's anti-lynching campaign that publicized the crime's horrors.

<sup>52</sup> McKay (1973, 124).

personal and political factors converging at the right historical and individual moment. For some black soldiers, this moment no doubt came during the war. Afterwards, they could not, as Houston noted, strike back without enormous risk to themselves and their families. It is therefore conceivable that the most sustained period of political activism in the lives of some veterans came while they were in the army, not after they returned home.

Regardless of whether circumstances in the civilian world forced individuals to mute their protests against discrimination, the war continued to influence the lives of African American veterans in a myriad of other ways. Many African American soldiers came home with permanent reminders of the war in the form of battle wounds or in a weakened state after falling victim to one of the contagious diseases that swept through the army at home and overseas. Whether told through the stories of prominent individuals or the unknown, the saga of the disabled African American veteran reveals the personal and lingering toll that the war took.

The risks combatants faced on the Western Front were never far from the thoughts of those with relatives or acquaintances in the army. Families of servicemen agonized over the veracity of rumors that the army was using black troops as front-line shock troops, failing to notify relatives of severely injured or dead soldiers, and leaving wounded black men to die on the battlefield. Families praying for the safe return of loved ones also heard disturbing reports that the Germans were shooting black prisoners of war or returning them to American lines with their eyes gouged out and arms cut off and that black units were being "cut to pieces in France."<sup>53</sup> Blaming these stories on German propagandists, the War Department called upon Pershing to send a publishable statement refuting these claims.<sup>54</sup> Besides reflecting distrust of the wartime army's use and treatment of black soldiers, these rumors also revealed a realistic understanding that the war meant death and disfigurement for many of those who fought it.

<sup>53</sup> Loving (June 30, 1918). For the sustained governmental effort to investigate and combat these rumors see, Hall (September 28, 1918), Memorandum for Major Spingarn (July 1, 1918), Stratton (July 19, 1918), Fosdick (March 23, 1919) *Amsterdam News* (April 19, 1918), Loving (June 10, 1918).

<sup>54</sup> Memorandum for the Adjutant General of the Army (June 1918) and Pershing (June 20, 1918).



The four regiments of the provisional 93rd Division, which served and fought with the French Army, are rightly heralded for their magnificent performance in battle. The record of the 369th Regiment was especially noteworthy because it was in the front lines for 191 days, the longest of any American regiment during the war. These units clearly deserve ample praise for demonstrating to the world that black soldiers could serve with distinction in elite combat regiments. Their illustrious battlefield performance played an important role in the postwar civil rights movement by giving activists the ability to refute army claims that black soldiers were only suited for noncombatant roles. Discussing the experiences of the 93rd Division only in celebratory terms, however, diminishes appreciation for the physical and emotional toll that fighting for long stretches in the horrific conditions existing along the Western Front had on these troops.<sup>55</sup>

Corporal Horace Pippin's experiences demonstrate just how terrible the fighting could be and how hard the return home was for many veterans of the famed 369th.<sup>56</sup> Pippin was a self-taught artist who carried a sketchbook with him throughout the war. Like other members of the 369th, Pippin's life revolved around the routine of twenty days in the trenches followed by ten days in the rear. At the front, Pippin manned listening posts, participated in numerous nighttime raids and fought hand-to-hand duals with German soldiers. Soon, he was a seasoned veteran who "had seen men die in all forms and shapes."<sup>57</sup> Pippin's war came to an end during the 369th's assault on Séchault in late September 1918. As his unit waited to go over the top at dawn, the artillery fired the first salvos of the assault. The noise was so intense "you would have thought the world was coming to an end," Pippin later recalled, although his artistic sensibility made it impossible for him to ignore that "those shells bursting in the night was a pretty sight." After advancing slowly throughout the first day, Pippin and his comrades spent the night lying along the crest of a hill to avoid sweeping German machine gun fire. When they resumed their advance the following day, Pippin

<sup>55</sup> Nearly every account of African American soldiers celebrates the achievements of the 369th Regiment, including Barbeau and Henri (1974), Nalty (1986) and Harris (2003). Buckley (2001) makes brief mention of one veteran's postwar difficulties.

<sup>56</sup> Works on Horace Pippin include Stein (1993), Rodman (1947), May, (1998).

<sup>57</sup> Pippin (1947, 79–80).

agonized over leaving the dead and wounded behind. "We wished we could help the wounded but we couldn't. We had to leave them there and keep advancing, ducking from shell hole to shell hole all day."<sup>58</sup> The next day, Pippin joined their ranks when he was hit in the shoulder as he dove for cover into a shell hole.<sup>59</sup> Another soldier bound his wound before leaving Pippin there to fend for himself. Pippin tried several times to climb out of the hole and head for the rear, but each time shots from a German sniper drove him back down. Finally, Pippin was too weak to do anything more than wait for help to arrive. The first sign of hope came later in the day when a passing French sniper discovered Pippin. But before Pippin could warn him to stay down, the German sniper shot the French soldier through the head without even knocking off his helmet. "He stood there for at least ten seconds before he slipped down and when he did, [he] slid down on top of me. I had lost so much blood by this time I couldn't even move him," Pippin remembered. Pippin lay immobilized with the dead French soldier over him for several hours, although he was thankful for the water and bread that the man carried.<sup>60</sup> Finally, a rescue party arrived and put him on a stretcher by the side of the road. Pippin waited in a steady, cold rain for another twelve hours before an ambulance transported him to a field hospital.

Returning home with a steel plate in his shoulder and a nearly useless right arm, Pippin only worked sporadically after the war. His family survived on his \$22.50 a month disability allowance and his wife's work as a laundress. Pippin was not a recluse, however. He took an active interest in his community and served as commander of his local black American Legion post in West Chester, Pennsylvania for several years. Yet despite his normal outward appearance, Pippin

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> In his memoirs, Pippin gives more detail about his wounding. Once the sniper had trapped Pippin and another soldier in a shell hole, they came up with the following plan: "I said to my comrade, you go one way, and I'll go the other, and one of us can get him, for we could not see him from where we were at for he were back of a rock now it were to get him in sight and to do that we hat[sic] to take a chance of one to get it. Both of us left the shell hole at the same time. I got near the shell hole that I had picked out when he let me have it. I went down in the shell hole. He clipped my neck and got me throw my shoulder and right arm." Pippin (undated memoir).

<sup>60</sup> Pippin (undated memoir).

experienced bouts of depression and was haunted by his memories of combat. He tried writing and sketching about his experiences, but was unhappy with the results. He finally decided to try painting, using his left hand to guide his right. His first effort was "The End of The War: Starting Home" (1931). Pippin spent three years working on "The End of the War", trying to get right the image that he had been carrying around in his head since returning home. In these early years, his friends and family were supportive of what they saw as nothing more than a harmless hobby and Pippin sometimes managed to use his paintings to settle outstanding bills. In 1937, however, Pippin was discovered by the Philadelphia art community and soon received national recognition as a true primitive much like his better-known contemporaries Jacob Lawrence and Grandma Moses. Although this rags-to-riches tale seemingly provided a happy ending to Pippin's story, his physical pain, taste for alcohol, and mounting family problems made this success bittersweet. The war was never far from his thoughts. In recounting his life story to a journalist in 1940, Pippin only devoted a few paragraphs to his pre- and postwar years, while taking pages to relate his service overseas. In 1946, Pippin died of a stroke.

The war, Pippin wrote, "brought out all of the art in me."<sup>61</sup> Pippin's paintings offer an unflinching glimpse of the harsh, brutal, and sometimes poetic aspects of modern warfare. Pippin painted the terrifying moment when mustard and nerve gas descended on troops scrambling for their gas masks, the desolate terrain left lifeless by constant artillery bombardments, the fearless feats of aerial pilots engaged in a dogfight, the isolation that each man felt even while surrounded by his comrades, and the final moment when German soldiers came out of their holes in the ground to surrender. Memories of segregation within the military and the ghosts of lost comrades informed a host of paintings completed during the Second World War.

Pippin documented the emotional and physical toll of the war's carnage on African American soldiers, who in his paintings represent all the Allied soldiers who fought in the war. Pippin's paintings transcended the racial barriers of contemporary civilian life by depicting the horrors experienced by combatants, regardless of skin color

<sup>61</sup> Pippin (undated letter).

or nationality. For Pippin, combat in the First World War was the defining moment of his life, and his paintings are among the best, if not the best, by any American artist of the conflict.

In contrast to Pippin who became famous well after the war, Henry Johnson and Needham Roberts received immediate acclaim for their heroic deeds in combat, only to fall on hard times later on. Johnson and Roberts became the most celebrated African American soldiers of the war when they fought off a German raiding party.<sup>62</sup> Sitting in an isolated listening post in No Man's Land on the night of May 14, 1918, Roberts and Johnson were part of a party of five on the lookout for an enemy attack. Noticing movement outside their post, the two discovered an enemy patrol and gave the alert. "The Germans cut us off from retreating and we had to fight. It was 25 against us 2," Roberts wrote in a letter home. "Having thrown all my grenades, I was wounded and put out of the fight. But my comrade Johnson resisted and drove them away all alone."<sup>63</sup> When two Germans attempted to enter their shelter, Johnson fired his rifle into the enemy soldier leading the assault. His three shots gone, Johnson had no choice but to club down the second German with his rifle butt. Glancing behind him, Johnson saw another two Germans carrying Roberts off as a prisoner. With the Germans on his front subdued, Johnson turned and jumped onto the soldier holding Roberts's shoulders. "As Johnson sprang, he unsheathed his bolo knife, and as his knees landed upon the shoulders of that ill-fated Boche, the blade of the knife was buried to the hilt through the crown of the German's head," his commanding officer, Captain Arthur Little attested.<sup>64</sup> Johnson was not in the clear yet. The soldier he had clubbed with his rifle had risen and was bearing down on him, pistol drawn. The German shot and wounded Johnston, who nonetheless managed to plunge his knife into the enemy soldier's abdomen and turn it. "The enemy patrol was in a panic. The dead and wounded were piled upon stretchers and carried away," Little reported.<sup>65</sup> Johnson was

<sup>62</sup> Little (1936). Nearly every book devoted to the black soldiers' experiences during the First World War discussed the exploits of Johnson and Roberts. Little's had the distinction of being a firsthand account.

<sup>63</sup> Controle postal (May 26–June 1, 1918).

<sup>64</sup> Little (1936, 195).

<sup>65</sup> Little (1936, 196).

now critically injured and losing blood, but he nonetheless continued to harass the retreating Germans with grenades. Little concluded at the end of his investigation that Roberts and Johnson had killed four of the Germans who attacked them that night. "I saw them when they brought them back. Neither one of them could walk . . . they had two guys carrying Johnson, and Johnson, his legs was gone, his legs was [sic] hanging," James Jones recalled.<sup>66</sup>

The two returned to acclaim, but experienced tremendous difficulty readjusting to postwar life. Roberts would eventually die in a mental hospital. Johnson returned to an adoring public, riding to general acclaim when the 369th marched down Fifth Avenue in a victory parade. He spent a few months traveling the lecture circuit to tell his story, and basked in the adulation of well-wishers who freely offered him drinks and money. "If I was a white man, I would be the next Governor of New York," Johnson told one crowd. On his lecture tour, Johnson angered whites when he gave a well-publicized speech in St. Louis in which he accused a white lieutenant of fleeing in battle and reportedly claimed that black soldiers had won the war. The next morning, a group of marines descended on Johnson's hotel, but he managed to elude them and return to Albany, New York without incident. Lost in the ensuing controversy were Johnson's comments about what he had really seen and felt along the Western Front. "Yes, I saw dead piled all around and they didn't separate the dead over there. Whites and black were put in the closest hole together," Johnson recalled.<sup>67</sup> After public interest in his feats died down, Johnson struggled to maintain a tranquil family life. Due to a clerical error on his discharge certificate that made no mention of his injuries, Johnson was denied a disability allowance even though his painful war wounds made it increasingly difficult for him to hold a job. Within a few years of his return, he and his wife divorced and an alcoholic Johnson was living the life of an unemployed vagrant.<sup>68</sup> He died under mysterious circumstances in 1929 and was buried in Arlington Cemetery.

<sup>66</sup> Jones (1997).

<sup>67</sup> "Negroes Did Heavy Fighting, Declares Real War Hero in Speech Before 5000 Here", (March 29, 1919).

<sup>68</sup> Johnson's grave in Arlington Cemetery was not discovered until 2002. Until then, it was assumed that he was buried in an unmarked pauper's grave in Albany, New York. Arlington Cemetery press releases (January 11, 2002, February 10, 2002, and March 19, 2002) and DiSanto (1997).

Pippin, Johnson, and Roberts were publicly celebrated for their achievements. Their struggles with readjustment and lingering wartime injuries remained intensely personal and private affairs. They were not alone, however. Other veterans of the 369th also faced gas-related pulmonary illnesses, life without the full use of arms and limbs, and crippling pain after the war.<sup>69</sup> As the child of one 369th veteran sadly concluded, "Some of them come back and they were of no use to their families, mentally and physically."<sup>70</sup>

The NAACP received numerous letters from disabled veterans seeking help with their claims for disability ratings, allowances, and hospitalization. These letters from those struggling to provide for themselves and their families provide a vivid window into the lives of disabled veterans. "On account of the poor condition of my health and my inability to carry on, all my hopes for doing something in life worth while have been blasted," one veteran lamented.<sup>71</sup> New civil rights struggles for these veterans included fighting for admittance into vocational re-education courses outside of the traditionally accepted occupations for black men and striving to obtain appropriate disability ratings. A continuum of racism and discrimination connected the wartime and postwar experiences of disabled black soldiers, but so did the proclivity of these veterans to fight back and protest when possible. As one disabled veteran put it, "I know my rights."<sup>72</sup>

Both white and black disabled veterans often felt that the financial and physical burden of their war injuries went unappreciated by the government officials and doctors who determined the amount of their monthly disability allowance and their eligibility to receive care in a government hospital. African American veterans faced an additional obstacle, however, because in the decentralized Veterans Bureau system these decisions were usually made by unsympathetic southern bureaucrats and doctors. "Since the war, some of the Southern crackers are using different means to keep we [sic] colored soldiers out of the hospitals and from getting vocational training. Their reason for keeping us out of training is to rate us in compensation as

<sup>69</sup> Thompson (April 10, 1922) and King (September 4, 1930).

<sup>70</sup> Nickson (1997).

<sup>71</sup> Marrs (December 28, 1932).

<sup>72</sup> Dill (May 9, 1922).

low as possible," Joel Moore charged in a letter to the NAACP in 1924.<sup>73</sup> Only veterans with complaints wrote to the NAACP, therefore, these letters paint a uniformly dim picture. The Veterans Bureau countered that many black veterans received timely and beneficial treatment in government hospitals. Yet even if a veteran obtained appropriate care, he usually received it in a segregated ward that he often reached by traveling in a Jim Crow train car.<sup>74</sup>

Seeking care for service-related injuries in the poisonous racial climate of the 1920's also inflicted additional stress on already ill veterans. Did racism and discrimination affect the psychological well-being of black servicemen and veterans? Rayford Logan suggested in his memoir that the shell shock he suffered while in France was only partly due to the shell blast that knocked him unconscious. "My [battle] fatigue resulted from overwork and the trauma of my encounters with Colonel Young [his white commanding officer]," Logan concluded years later.<sup>75</sup> Logan attributed his rapid recovery to French doctors who let him unburden his pent-up anger against white Americans.<sup>76</sup> In the 1920's, some black doctors agreed with Logan's suspicion that a racially hostile climate had a detrimental effect on the health of black ex-servicemen. How would ill veterans fare in the all-black Tuskegee Veterans Hospital located in Alabama when "environment is certainly an important factor in their care and cure," Dr. W.G. Alexander wondered in a letter to the *Journal of the National Medical Association*.<sup>77</sup> Anecdotal evidence supported this doctor's fear. One veteran's wife concluded that a New York veteran hospital's practice of bringing white patients into the black ward to die "has worked against her husband's health more so than his illness" and described him "as a mental wreck."<sup>78</sup> Nick Wallace, committed to the Marion Military Home in Indianapolis, related how supervisors kept the black patients confined, while white veterans had free use of the grounds. "Now this place is suppose [sic] to be a mental

<sup>73</sup> Moore (December 29, 1923).

<sup>74</sup> For ill veterans who were told to wait until a bed in a colored ward was available, see Martin and White (1925), Verner (1930), King (1930) The White file also refers to the hardships of riding in Jim Crow cars, as does Snell (July 2, 1923).

<sup>75</sup> Logan (undated, Autobiography, 24).

<sup>76</sup> Logan harbored a visceral hatred of American whites that prevented him from returning to the United States until 1924. Logan (undated, Autobiography, 1).

<sup>77</sup> Alexander W.G. (February, 1933).

<sup>78</sup> Davis W.F. (April 14, 1931).

place . . . lots of them if they would be given a chance I believe they would regain their health but instead of giving them a chance they keep them locked up," Wallace complained. Furthermore, Wallace wrote, "if you hold up for your wrights [sic] you are thrown" into solitary confinement in annex reserved for violent patients, where "they will try to run you insane" with systematic beatings.<sup>79</sup> Thus, the war continued for black veterans in more ways than one.

In a time of renewed struggle for civil rights, black soldiers' wartime agitation attested to their desire to engage in collective action when circumstances allowed. After the war, ample numbers of college-educated and working-class veterans joined the civil rights movement and helped infuse it with an angrier and more militant tone. Many other veterans, however, returned to find a new wave of racial terror sweeping the south. It was therefore perhaps during, rather than after, the war, that some of these veterans made the strongest stand of their lifetime against prejudice and discrimination. Whether fleeting or sustained, however, soldiers' protests made a substantial contribution to the civil rights movement and created a valuable legacy for the next wartime generation. The personal impact of the war on individual soldiers was as profound. Pressing for the full range of benefits that the law made available to them, some disabled veterans enlisted the aid of the NAACP to help them obtain care and thus continued their wartime struggle for equal rights in a new domain. Whether their injuries remained a private burden or gave rise to political agitation, the wounds of war kept the Great War alive in many black households well after the guns fell silent on the Western Front.

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