



2017

## Forgotten Soldiers from a Forgotten War: Oral History Testimonies of African American Korean War Veterans

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

FORGOTTEN SOLDIERS FROM A FORGOTTEN WAR: ORAL HISTORY  
TESTIMONIES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN KOREAN WAR VETERANS

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN HISTORY

BY

OTIS ELIOT POPE, JR.

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

MAY 2017

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all of my supporters who have played a role in helping me with this dissertation. Dr. Manning, my committee chairman, has played a critical role in not only helping me to flush out my ideas for the dissertation, but he has been a wonderful role model for me as I have matriculated through the Ph.D. program. Dr. Karamanski, thank you for giving me insight into this topic. You have been an amazing mentor and friend. Dr. Mooney-Melvin, thank you for your insight and support over the years. You have been a great mentor and supporter.

Additionally, I would like to thank Dr. Samuel Attoh for the merit scholarship that he provided to me a few years ago. Without it, I would not be standing here today. I would also like to thank Lillian Hardison and her continued assistance over the years. Further, I would like to thank Suzanne Kaufman for admitting me into the PhD program and for the unfiltered advice that she has given to me over the years.

Finally, I would like to thank my family for their unwavering support that they have provided to me over the years. In particular, I would like to thank my mom for supporting me throughout the long, arduous journey of getting a PhD. Lastly, I would like to thank Yaneth Bello, my wife, for her patience and determination to see that I complete my dissertation. I would not have finished this PhD without all of these people.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Korean War of 1950 to 1953 was a watershed moment in US military history because it was the first war that put President Harry Truman's Executive Order 9981, which desegregated the US military, into action. And yet, the Korean War, also known as the "Forgotten War," has been inadequately covered within US military historiography. Similarly, although historiography addressing the role of African Americans in the US military is generally robust, the military service of African Americans during the Korean War is largely overlooked.

*Forgotten Soldiers from a Forgotten War: Oral History Testimonies of African American Soldiers from the Korean War* seeks to fill this gap. This dissertation will enhance the scholarship on African Americans' participation in the Korean War by revealing the people, places, and events that encouraged African Americans to enlist. Additionally, this study will use oral history testimonies to reveal how African American soldiers prepared for war during basic training service. Finally, this dissertation will explore the impact of the Korean War on soldiers professionally and psychologically. By attending to the stories African American veterans of the Korean War tell about their enlistment, training, and service, I aim to illuminate the previously unrepresented history of the African American experience during the Korean War. I argue African American Korean War veterans' oral history testimonies reveal the following: social and economic factors encouraged many African American Korean War veterans to sign up for the US military; the training they received prepared them for war; the institutional racism they faced affected their performance on the battlefield; and the Korean War's impact on African American

soldiers was nuanced as it helped some achieve financial success, while leaving others with psychological damage that they still cope with today.

When the United States entered the Korean War in 1950, many believed the nation would prepare as it had for World War II.<sup>1</sup> For example, many Americans were concerned they would be forced to ration food.<sup>2</sup> However, the United States did not prepare for the Korean War in the same manner as for World War II, and as a result, the American public became detached from the conflict. According to Melinda Pash, when a full mobilization failed to occur, “Americans turned back to their own lives, ignoring the conflict raging half a world away.”<sup>3</sup>

This detachment was compounded by the possibility of avoiding public or private discourse on the conflict. Indeed, another reason the Korean War was viewed as the Forgotten War is that many Korean War veterans often did not talk about the war. Many World War II veterans and Vietnam War veterans came home and talked about their participation in the war, whereas many Korean War veterans did not talk about the war.<sup>4</sup> Many soldiers who served in the Korean War came home and tried to forget their wartime experiences.<sup>5</sup> Korean War veterans’ tendency not to vocalize their experiences during the war ensured that the Korean War would take a back seat to World War II and Vietnam within America’s collective memory of war.

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<sup>1</sup>Interview: Melinda Pash, Why Is Korea the “Forgotten War”? HistoryNet, <http://www.historynet.com/interview-melinda-pash-why-is-korea-the-forgotten-war.htm>

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

## Overview of African American Soldiers and the Korean War

As a result of some Korean War veterans opting not to discuss their experiences, US military historiography has paid more attention to World War II and the Vietnam War. For example, a search on the Barnes and Noble website yields 17,999 World War II books, 2,134 Vietnam War books, and 1,572 Korean War books.<sup>6</sup> This online search indicates that World War II and the Vietnam War overshadow the Korean War. Most importantly, these numbers demonstrate World War II and the Vietnam War are prominently situated within American popular culture, while the Korean War has been largely forgotten.

As with historiography's treatment of the Korean War generally, so too the African American contribution to that war effort is significantly underrepresented in literature. Historiography has revealed the impact African Americans have had on every major and minor American conflict, from the Revolutionary War and the World Wars to Vietnam and the more recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Works like Douglas Egerton's *African Americans and the Revolutionary America* reveal that African American slaves fought with British, French, and American forces during the Revolutionary War and shaped the outcome of the war by their participation.<sup>7</sup> Books like David Williams' *I Freed Myself: African American Self-Emancipation in the Civil War Era* highlight how some African American soldiers fought courageously against

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<sup>6</sup>Barnes and Noble, <http://www.barnesandnoble.com> (accessed April 29, 2016).

<sup>7</sup>Douglas R. Egerton, *Death or Liberty: African Americans and the Revolutionary America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 137. Alan Gilbert, *Black Patriots and Loyalists: Fighting for Emancipation in the War for Independence* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012). Gilbert reveals how slaves vacillated between fighting for the British and the American sides during the Revolutionary War. Gilbert uses the story of Seymour Burr to illustrate how slaves' decisions to serve in the army were dependent upon which government would secure their freedom. Seymour Burr ran away from his master to join the British forces because he thought they would grant him his freedom after the war. When he was caught, his owner asked him why he ran away. Burr replied that he was only seeking to secure his freedom. His owner suggested that if he gave him his bounty money, he would allow him to join the Continental Army. Furthermore, his owner stated that at the end of the war he would give him his freedom. Burr agreed and served in the Seventh Regiment of the Continental Army until the end of the war (97-98).

the Confederate Army.<sup>8</sup> As Williams notes, African American soldiers earned respect by fighting bravely against the Confederate Army at James Island, located just south of Charleston, South Carolina, and at Fort Wagner, which protected the Charleston Harbor.<sup>9</sup> Historiographies like Adriane Lentz-Smith's *Freedom Struggles: African Americans and World War I* explore how African American participation in World War I encouraged them to fight for equal rights.<sup>10</sup> Despite historiography illustrating African American soldiers' participation in many American conflicts, the historical narrative has overlooked African American soldiers' roles in the Korean War.

Although dominant historiography tends to overlook both the Korean War and the role of African Americans in this conflict, many public and private memories highlight the African American experience during the Korean War. Historiography on African Americans and their Korean War experience fall into two basic categories: works that address desegregation efforts and works that narrate African American combat participation in the war itself. Oral history testimonies revealed the following: some African American soldiers enlisted in the US military for financial reasons; various forms of racism influenced their performance on the battlefield;

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<sup>8</sup>David Williams, *I Freed Myself: African American Self-Emancipation in the Civil War Era* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2014), 90. According to Williams, African American soldiers fought against Confederate soldiers throughout the Civil War. For example, former slaves "helped fend off attacking Rebels at Milliken's Bend, a federal stronghold on the Mississippi River just north of Vicksburg" (137). As a result of the former slaves' participation in the war, "the sentiment of this army with regard to the employment of negro troops has been revolutionized by the bravery of the blacks in the recent Battle of Milliken's Bend. Prominent officers, who used in private to sneer at the idea, are now heartily in favor of it" (137).

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Adriane Lentz-Smith, *Freedom Struggles: African Americans and World War I* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 237. Smith uses the stories of various African American World War I veterans to support her claim that World War I inculcated a desire for social equality into African American soldiers. Ely Green, for example, vowed to "live the rest of [his] life as a black man to both flags," France's and America's, even if it meant defying Jim Crow laws (148). Kathryn Johnson and Addie Hunton, both Korean War veterans, went on to have their memoir, *Two Colored Women with the American Expeditionary Forces*, published. Johnson stated that she wrote her memoir so that African Americans would know who they were and that they had the potential for greatness (210).

and the Korean War left deep psychological scars on some African American Korean War veterans.

Works on the desegregation of the US military focus on the implementation of Executive Order 9981, which desegregated the US military in 1948. Scholarship that concentrates on the combat experience of African Americans during the war tends to evaluate African American soldiers' performance on the battlefield. In both cases, the historical narrative does not address the social and political complexities that directly affected African American soldiers who served during the Korean War era. Moreover, although each of these genres addresses the Korean War, their different focuses and content result in two diverging understandings of the African American experience of that war. As we will see, these competing perspectives elide a central part of the individual soldier's experience as well.

One reason for this elision of the personal, individual experience is an overemphasis on the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment's military performance. Indeed, the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment dominates the historiography of African Americans in the Korean War. The narrow focus on one combat regiment has the effect of occluding key details of the African American experience during the Korean War era. Historiography fails to address African American soldiers' motivation for joining the US military and the racism they experienced during basic training. Moreover, historiography ignores the emotional impact of the war on these soldiers.

Some of the most persuasive work within the historiography of desegregation focuses on the unique challenges faced within specific branches of the military. Alan Gropman's *The Air Force Integrates: 1945-1964* "describes the struggle to desegregate the post-World War II US

Army Air Forces and its successor, the US Air Force, and the remarkable advances made during the next two decades to end racial segregation and move towards equality of treatment of Negro airmen.”<sup>11</sup> Gropman claims that the US Air Force embraced integration because it wanted to become a more effective fighting force.<sup>12</sup> He contextualizes this point by highlighting the racist ideology the US Air Force embraced prior to Executive Order 9981. For example, he points to a War College memorandum entitled “The Use of Negro Manpower in War.” Written by Major General H. E. Ely on October 30, 1925, the memorandum suggested that African Americans were “very low in the scale of human evolution”<sup>13</sup> and claimed that “the cranial cavity of the Negro is smaller than the white; his brain weighing 35 ounces contrasted with 45 for the white.”<sup>14</sup> The US Air Force used racist memoranda such as this to justify a broad policy of discrimination and segregation that lasted from July of 1926 to May of 1949.<sup>15</sup>

Despite these racist attitudes, African American airmen fought back. Gropman explains, “In April 1945 more than 100 Negro officers forcefully protested segregated facilities and discriminatory policies at Freeman Field, Ind. They were arrested by their white commanders and accused of being on the verge of a mutiny.”<sup>16</sup> This event illustrates the sacrifice African American airmen were willing to make to protest discriminatory policies. As a direct result of these and other protests, President Harry Truman desegregated the US military, including the Air

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<sup>11</sup>Alan Gropman, *The Air Force Integrates: 1945-1964* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998), I.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., iii-iv.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 2.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 4.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 1.

Force, in 1948. Two years after President Truman desegregated the military, the United States entered the Korean War.

A comparative analysis of oral history testimonies and historiography is key to my examination. In particular, I will examine the differences between historiography and oral history testimonies' coverage of the experiences of African American soldiers during the Korean War. Most historiography emphasizes the war experience of African American soldiers during basic training and in combat without giving the African American soldiers who served in the Korean War a voice. Oral histories, on the other hand, paint a more complex picture of African American soldiers by revealing their motivations to join the military, what obstacles they faced, and how the war had an impact on their lives. Public memories differ from private memories because they focus more on how African American soldiers performed poorly in battle and less on how institutional racism affected their performance. In a nutshell, oral history testimonies reveal that African Americans were, in fact, competent soldiers who—in spite of lingering racist bias—served their country honorably during the Korean War.

Studying both the public and private memories of African American veterans provides fresh insight into the following areas: how the US military addressed integration; the type of training African American soldiers received; how African American soldiers applied their training during combat; and how the Korea War affected African American soldiers personally and professionally. Above all, oral testimonies can finally give African American soldiers a voice within the historical narrative of the Korean War. As a result of this dissertation, a deeper and more complex understanding of African American soldiers' experiences during the Korean

War will emerge—an understanding that will challenge historiography’s depiction of those troops.

### **Historiographies of Desegregation**

Although scholars have taken a variety of critical approaches to examining African Americans’ military experience, desegregation is underrepresented, and the speed with which it was implemented generally overstated. Some historians look at African Americans’ fight for equal rights in the military as a phenomenon spanning several hundred years. Gerald Astor’s *The Right to Fight* examines African Americans’ participation in US military engagements from the Revolutionary War to Vietnam. He references a paper by Lieutenant Solomon Cutcher for the Air Command and Staff College that asserted that any limitations African Americans had “were ‘scientifically proven to be products of environment and not characteristic of race.’”<sup>17</sup> Astor concludes that the fight against racism had to continue to ensure the armed forces moved toward racial equality.

Just as Astor claims that African American soldiers eventually secured equality within the US military, Adriane Lentz-Smith shows that African American soldiers fought for years before they achieved parity in the US military and in American society. In *Freedom Struggles*, Lentz-Smith examines the impact of World War I on African American soldiers. She argues the war gave them a new sense of masculinity and racial pride. Lentz-Smith suggests that World War I involved a pivotal series of events that transformed young African American soldiers into agents of change. According to Lentz-Smith, African American soldiers who fought in World War I later went on to fight for equality in American society. Lentz-Smith concludes, “The

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<sup>17</sup>Gerald Astor, *The Right to Fight: A History of African Americans in the Military* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 1998), 328.

activism of World War I outlasted the repression of the 1920s and the Depression of the 1930s, kept alive by the watchfulness and willfulness of democracy's advance guard. And in the years after World War II, it would prove too strong for even Jim Crow's defenses."<sup>18</sup> Simply put, World War I inspired some African American soldiers to make the United States more equitable for all citizens.

While historians such as Astor and Lentz-Smith focus on African American soldiers' experiences in the military and in civilian society, another strand of literature seeks to demonstrate that desegregation improved the US military by making it more cohesive and efficient. In *Integration of the Negro in the US Armed Forces*, Richard Stillman contends that desegregation took place because soldiers believed it ultimately strengthened the military. According to Stillman, "Professional soldiers recognized segregated groupment in combat as a serious tactical weakness and saw that integration was the logical solution."<sup>19</sup> Based on this assessment, Commander Matthew Ridgway received authorization from the Pentagon on July 31, 1950, to proceed with integrating African American soldiers into his combat zone.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, Stillman suggests that integration was pragmatic. According to Stillman, professional soldiers seeking efficiency, not political leaders dictating social change, brought segregation to

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<sup>18</sup>Adriane Lentz-Smith, *Freedom Struggles: African Americans and World War I* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 237.

<sup>19</sup>Richard Stillman, *Integration of the Negro in the US Armed Forces* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1968), 54. Other works explore desegregation efforts immediately prior to the Korean War. *Foxholes and Color Lines*, by Sherie Mershon and Ron Powers, addresses desegregation efforts through US military policy between World War II and Vietnam. Their book "emphasizes the intense political conflict and bargaining that accompanied policy innovation, the strenuous resistance of the armed forces and much of the white public to racial integration, and the uncertain path of policy implementation during alternating periods of active war and Cold War" (XI). Mershon and Powers assert that military policy on African Americans evolved because "major changes on blacks were shaped by policy decisions by interest groups and partisan electoral rivalries" (307-308).

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 54.

an end. However, in his assessment, Stillman overlooks the role civil rights activists played in helping to desegregate the military.

Indeed, civic activism played an instrumental role in desegregating the armed forces.<sup>21</sup> According to Christine Knauer, individuals such as A. Philip Randolph and Grant Reynolds led the fight to integrate the military by founding the Committee Against Jim Crow in the Military Service and Training.<sup>22</sup> In *Let Us Fight as Free Men*, Knauer focuses on Randolph's efforts to desegregate the military by ending Jim Crow. Randolph, a towering figure within the civil rights movement, went before a Senate committee and threatened to use nonviolent protests to force the military to desegregate.<sup>23</sup> As a direct result of his testimony, the military began to contemplate ending segregation. *Let Us Fight as Free Men* shows how Randolph's skilled negotiation with the US government was pivotal in the fight to secure equal rights within the military.

In addition to individual actors such as Randolph and Reynolds, black and white activists worked together to secure equal rights for African Americans in the military. Unlike Stillman, who gives credit for ending segregation to white professional soldiers, Rawn James suggests that a multiethnic coalition forced the military to reevaluate its stance on segregation.<sup>24</sup> In *The Double V*, James asserts that African American participation in World War II was an example of how African American involvement in the military would eventually bring equal rights to all African Americans.

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<sup>21</sup>Christine Knauer, *Let Us Fight as Free Men* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 65.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 69.

<sup>24</sup>Rawn James, Jr., *The Double V: How Wars, Protest, and Harry Truman Desegregated America's Military* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013), 143.

Along with desegregation activists pushing for reforms within the US military, ending the quota system was a critical component to the surge of African American soldiers in the US armed forces. By July of 1950, African American representation within the US military rose by one and a half points, to almost 12 percent.<sup>25</sup> Not all military leaders viewed the increase of African American soldiers as beneficial to the US armed forces. To curtail the flow of African Americans, the US armed forces established a quota to limit the number of African Americans who could sign up for the military.<sup>26</sup> The racial allowance was discontinued in April of 1950, with the understanding that it could be reinstated if “the expected increase in black servicemen proved unwieldy.”<sup>27</sup> Once the racial quota was removed, African American enlistment jumped.<sup>28</sup>

The surge of African American enlistment ultimately helped the US war effort in Korea. As the war progressed, African American soldiers helped fill the ranks of white fighting units. According to Bernard Nalty in *Strength for the Fight*, the US Marine Corps “needed men to fight in Korea and could not waste time sorting them out by race and assigning them accordingly.”<sup>29</sup> Segregation meant clerk administrators for the US military were preoccupied with maintaining a separate classification and assignment system for white and black soldiers.<sup>30</sup> This system wasted resources and time. Unimpeded by the bureaucracy of segregation, the US military became a

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<sup>25</sup>Michael Green, *Black Yanks in the Pacific* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 20.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>Bernard Nalty, *Strength for the Fight* (London: The Free Press, 1986), 262.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 263.

more efficient and aggressive fighting force.<sup>31</sup> As a result, the US military administered procedures more effectively, thereby enhancing its use of manpower.<sup>32</sup>

Historians debate the date the military implemented desegregation. Some, such as Jack Foner in *Blacks and the Military in American History*, contend that desegregation was implemented at the outset of the Korean War. As Foner argues, “During the first months of the Korean War, ... integration was extended to training units in the United States and combat units in Korea.”<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, private memories, including the oral history testimonies collected for this dissertation, suggest that desegregation happened only at the end of the Korean War.

Most private memories of African American Korean War veterans indicate that the US military was still segregated throughout most of the Korean War. The oral history testimonies of Homer Franklin, Jesse Jenkins, Porche Taylor, and James Williams indicate desegregation did not take place until the end of the war. Homer Franklin, for example, served in a combat medical unit from April 1951 until the spring of 1953.<sup>34</sup> He reported that the US armed forces were still segregated throughout his service.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, Jesse Jenkins said he had no interaction with white soldiers in the US Army.<sup>36</sup> The experience of segregation extends across the military

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>Jack Foner, *Blacks and the Military in American History* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1974), 188-189.

<sup>34</sup>Homer Franklin, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Chicago, Illinois, November 28, 2014.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>Jesse Jenkins, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Crown Point, Indiana, February 18, 2015.

hierarchy. Porche Taylor, a retired colonel, also indicated that he experienced a segregated military during his service from 1953 to 1954.<sup>37</sup>

### **The Twenty-Fourth Infantry as Representative of the African American Experience of the Korean War**

The service of the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment was a mixture of triumphs and failures. The all-Black Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment was formed after the US military combined the Thirty-Eighth and Forty-First infantry regiments during September and October of 1869.<sup>38</sup> After its inception, the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment fought in skirmishes with Indians, provided protection for supply trains on the western frontier, and assisted with the survey of the Great Plains.<sup>39</sup> Additionally, the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment served in the Spanish–American War, World War I, World War II, and the Korean War. During the Korean War, the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment actively engaged with North Korean and Chinese soldiers. The Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment fought at Yech'on and Sangju and at the Pusan Perimeter. Hence, before the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment was deactivated in October of 1951, the infantry regiment had a long career of military service within the US armed forces.<sup>40</sup>

Historiography on the desegregation of the US military is flawed in several different ways. First, the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment is situated within the historical narrative as representative of all African American servicemen who served in the war. Second, African

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<sup>37</sup>Porche Taylor, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Richmond, Virginia, December 22, 2014.

<sup>38</sup>William Bowers, William Hammond, and George MacGarrigle, *Black Soldier/White Army: The 24th Infantry Regiment in Korea* (Washington: Center of Military History, 1997), 5.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 6.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., xiii.

American soldiers are blamed for their poor performance on the battlefield, despite having poor equipment, substandard leadership, and subjugation to racism. Historiographies that critique African American servicemen based on the shortcomings of the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment engage in victim blaming and overlook structural and bureaucratic issues facing African American soldiers throughout the military. Some historians have suggested that African American soldiers from the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment were cowardly and unreliable. They then apply this assessment to African American servicemen more generally. As I will show, the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment's reputation within historiography impacted the legacy of all African American soldiers who served during the Korean War, in spite of the overwhelming evidence that many African American soldiers fought bravely and honorably.

One highly controversial book that offers a narrow depiction of the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment is *Black Soldier, White Army* by William T. Bowers, William M. Hammond, and George L. MacGarrigle. Many black Korean War veterans reject the book for its simplistic and negative portrayal of African American soldiers during the Korean War. *Black Soldier, White Army* suggests that African American soldiers failed to perform according to the standards of the US military. As Philip Shenon notes, however, "black veterans have long argued that the Army has made the 24th Infantry a scapegoat for the overall failures of the United States Army in the early days of the Korean War."<sup>41</sup> Both black and white fighting units lost men and battles throughout the Korean War, yet Bowers, Hammond, and MacGarrigle single out African American soldiers in the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment as undermining the trust and respect soldiers had for their African American counterparts. According to *Black Soldier, White Army*,

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<sup>41</sup>Philip Shenon, "Veterans of Black Unit Threaten Suit over Army's Account of Their Service," *The New York Times*, May 7, 1996, A16.

the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment was subjected to poor leadership, morale issues, racism, and low-quality equipment.<sup>42</sup> In effect, *Black Soldier, White Army* suggests the problems the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment suffered from ensured they would fail. The authors' lack of nuance notwithstanding, *Black Soldier, White Army* has influenced many historians' understanding of the military prowess and service of African American soldiers during the Korean War.

While Max Hastings' British perspective adds some fresh insights to the larger narrative of the Korean War, he nonetheless joins Bowers, Hammond, and MacGarrigle in suggesting that the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment did not meet expectations. In *The Korean War*, Hastings seeks "to paint a portrait of the war, focusing upon some human and military aspects less familiar to readers on both sides of the Atlantic."<sup>43</sup> In his description of the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment, he argues that their poor performance prompted the US military to expedite the integration of African American soldiers. According to Hastings, the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment ran away during the battle of Yechon.<sup>44</sup> Colonel Bussey's autobiography, entitled *Firefight at Yechon: Courage and Racism in the Korean War*, challenges the assertion that African American soldiers underperformed at the battle by highlighting Colonel Bussey's military exploits at Yechon. It is apparent that with his uncritical interpretation of events, Hastings devalues the contributions of the members of the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment to the war effort and unfairly discredits them by suggesting they were cowardly and unreliable.

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<sup>42</sup>William Bowers, William Hammond, and George MacGarrigle, *Black Soldier, White Army: The 24th Infantry Regiment in Korea* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1997), 267.

<sup>43</sup>Max Hastings, *The Korean War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 13.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 80-81. Hastings relies upon the account of Walton Walker, commander of the Eighth Army, on the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment to highlight the inadequacies of the fighting unit. The author does not use any oral history testimonies from members of the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment who fought in battle.

Bernard C. Nalty's *Strength for the Fight* and Christine Knauer's *Let Us Fight as Free Men* likewise suggest that African Americans from the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment were poor fighters. According to Nalty, "In one skirmish, for example, almost an entire company melted away, leaving the commander, most of his noncommissioned officers, and a few riflemen to man the unit's foxholes."<sup>45</sup> Knauer's critique of the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment is problematic because he fails to use oral testimonies of African American soldiers to back up his claim. Instead, Knauer quotes one source, Major General William Kean, commander of the Twenty-Fifth Infantry Division, as saying that the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment was "untrustworthy and incapable of carrying out missions expected of an infantry regiment."<sup>46</sup> Each book draws on singular events and anecdotal evidence to argue that the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment did not meet expectations.

Gerald Astor provides a less harsh, although still negative, account of the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment. Astor, however, establishes some credibility for his claims by focusing on the unique challenges the unit faced. In *The Right to Fight*, Astor states that before the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment left for Korea, the unit was dysfunctional and lacked a strong command. The unit experienced such problems as "changes in superior officers, [and] rearrangement of enlisted personnel"<sup>47</sup> that hurt its cohesiveness. Additionally, Astor reveals that the changes "made a morale problem because men did not get promotions that were due for their

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<sup>45</sup>Nalty, *Strength for the Fight*, 256.

<sup>46</sup>Knauer, *Let Us Fight as Free Men*, 196.

<sup>47</sup>Astor, *The Right to Fight*, 351.

good work before the war.”<sup>48</sup> The failure to promote men who deserved it caused resentment within the ranks, and this dissatisfaction reduced the unit’s combat effectiveness.

While some historians scrutinize the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment as evidence of African American soldiers’ failure, the infantry unit does not reflect the experience of African American servicemen as a whole. Indeed, African American soldiers served in a wide range of capacities within the US military, from combat soldiers to fighter pilots to medical personnel. Moreover, smaller combat units, such as the Second Ranger Infantry Company, earned success on the battlefield. By broadening the scope of analysis to include other African American soldiers who served with honor and distinction during the war, this dissertation will reveal the shortcomings of modern historiography.

Books written about African American soldiers and the Korean War manipulate how these soldiers are perceived within the public. According to “Popular Memory: Theory, Politics, Method,” “historical representations, their connections with dominant institutions and the part they play in winning consent and building alliances in the processes of formal politics” have a powerful and pervasive impact on our understanding of historical events.<sup>49</sup> In this case, historiography plays an outsized role in constructing our understanding of African American military service. The majority of historians advance a narrative on the African American experience during the Korean War that is both politicized and reductive. To take but one example, *Black Soldier, White Army* makes the tautological argument that the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment was bound to fail as justification for the military’s decision to disband the

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<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 315.

<sup>49</sup>Popular Memory Group, “Popular Memory: Theory, Politics, Method,” in *Oral History Reader* ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (New York: Routledge, 1998), 44.

unit, when this decision to split up the regiment was a primary reason for its failure. The historical narrative that African American soldiers were incompetent relies on a narrow vision of African American military service, one informed exclusively by the outcome of the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment.

This conflict between interpretations of the past, both from historians and some oral history testimonies, reveals that the field is riddled with various constructions of the past that diverge more often than they cohere.<sup>50</sup> Some historians argue that the Twenty-Fourth Infantry failed to measure up to the standards of the US military. However, many oral history testimonies challenge this assertion. Personal memories of servicemen and women suggest African American soldiers fought as effectively as white soldiers did during the Korean War era. In spite of this conflict, the narrative that African American soldiers underperformed during the Korean War has dominated and gained broad acceptance, while alternative narratives that suggest African American soldiers did, in fact, fight courageously have been marginalized.<sup>51</sup> The limited perspective of some historians has overpowered the voices of the African Americans who served in the Korean War.

The dominant narrative of African Americans during the Korean War describes the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment as the American military's weak link. However, this understanding of black servicemen may reflect bias more than reality. According to "Popular Memory: Theory, Politics, Method," "Dominant representations may be those that are most

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<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 44-45.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

ideological, most obviously conforming to the flattened stereotypes of myth.”<sup>52</sup> In other words, the historical narrative that suggests African Americans served dishonorably may reflect societal prejudice rather than facts or truth. Additionally, historians have focused almost exclusively on the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment. As a result of this narrow attention to one regiment, they have presented a distorted picture of the African American experience during the Korean War. Consequently, historiography’s story of the Korean War understates, ignores, or otherwise misrepresents important elements of the African American experience.

### **Enhancing the Historical Record with Oral History**

Historiography on African Americans and the Korean War reveals several shortcomings. First, none of the books take an in-depth look at the social and cultural factors that motivated African Americans to join the military during the Korean War. For example, the literature fails to address the impact poverty had on encouraging some African Americans to sign up for the US military or the influence of community members in encouraging others to enlist. As yet, no historiography explains in any detail why some African American soldiers joined a segregated military.

In addition to overlooking the social and cultural context of African American enlistment during segregation, the historical narrative has also failed to provide a bottom-up perspective on the African American experience during the Korean War. The traditional top-down approach to military history has been chiefly responsible for the failure to explore the motivations behind African Americans joining the US military during the Korean War era, but it also fails to explore the experience of the majority of African American servicemen. The focus on military commanders and influential politicians has robbed the era’s African American soldiers of their

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

voice. While the historiography of white servicemen who served during the Korean War offers an in-depth account of their experiences, the historical narrative on the Korean War has failed to highlight in detail the experiences of African American soldiers who served during the war.

A third shortcoming is that scholarship on African American Korean War veterans fails to cover the basic training experience. Indeed, of the dozens of works on African Americans and the Korean War, not a single book-length history devotes a chapter to boot camp or basic training as experienced by African American soldiers. Despite this dramatic oversight, some works, including *Strength for the Fight* and *The Korean War*, argue that African American soldiers did not fight well. Books such as *Black Soldier, White Army* suggest the inadequate training the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment received was among the reasons the regiment underperformed. Based on personal narratives from African American soldiers who served in all capacities in Korea, this dissertation will demonstrate that these soldiers were, in fact, competent fighters and prepared to go to war.

As this project will show, private memories can expand the dominant historiographies by giving voice to African American soldiers who served during the Korean War era. The oral history archive highlights people, places, and events that exerted an influence on African American soldiers' decisions to enlist in the US military. Additionally, oral history testimonies can be used to understand how African American soldiers prepared for the Korean War and how the US military primed African American soldiers for battle. Finally, oral testimonies reveal the combat experiences of African American soldiers. Taken together, the revelations and insights of oral history testimony help balance the portrayal of African American soldiers.

While the dominant scholarship on African Americans who served in the military reveals how they gained their rights as servicemen, critics leave many questions unanswered regarding the soldiers' personal or quotidian experiences. What motivated African Americans to join the US military despite being treated as second-class citizens? What were their experiences during basic training, and how did it prepare them for war? How did African Americans distinguish themselves on the battlefield? How does addressing these questions with individuals who served help us think differently about the African American experience, America's social order, and the Korean War? Addressing these questions reveals the impact of African American servicemen on the war effort and, above all, on American society.

This dissertation will address not only the dominant narrative of African Americans who served during the Korean War but also the psychological impact the war had on African American servicemen. *Forgotten Soldiers from a Forgotten War: Oral History Testimonies of African American Soldiers from the Korean War* will draw inspiration from the oral history methodology Alistair Thomson used to assess the psychological impact that fighting in World War I had on an Australian war veteran. In "Anzac Memories," Thomson explains that the way in which a society perceives war has a direct connection to the psychological impact on a veteran over time. Fred Farrall, the main subject in "Anzac Memories," was an Australian veteran of World War I. With interviews covering a 60-year period of Farrall's life, Thompson examined the evolution of Farrall's memory of his participation in the conflict. As Thomson reports, in Australia, "the legend of the Australian soldier—the best fighter in the war—caused many diggers (Australian soldiers) to repress their feelings, and worsened the psychological trauma of

the war.”<sup>53</sup> Feeling inadequate because he did not live up to the image of a soldier held by civilian society as heroic, Farrall developed an inferiority complex and avoided Anzac Day parades because he had “doubts about Australian involvement” in the war.<sup>54</sup> Farrall refused to wear his medals and “shut away his beautifully embossed discharge certificate in a dusty drawer.”<sup>55</sup> Over time, however, other Australians revered him for being one of the few remaining Great War Australian veterans, and Farrall’s image of the Australian War and Anzac Day changed.<sup>56</sup> “Anzac Memories” demonstrates that public sentiment toward veterans can directly influence the veterans’ psychological responses to their war experiences. Throughout this project, I reference the methodology of “Anzac Memories” to underscore how public perceptions can affect the way Korean War veterans view their own experiences of the war.

While “Anzac Memories” highlights how changes in cultural perceptions of the war within Australian society affected a soldier’s remembrance of his experiences during World War I, Mark Roseman’s “Surviving Memory: Truth and Inaccuracy in Holocaust Testimony” reveals how a person’s traumatic memory can be altered to protect him or her from emotional trauma. In “Surviving Memory: Truth and Inaccuracy in Holocaust Testimony,” Roseman showcases several events in Marianne Ellenbogen’s life as a young child. As a German-born Jew, Ellenbogen was subjected to the horrors of the Holocaust.<sup>57</sup> Fifty years after World War II,

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<sup>53</sup>Alistair Thomson, “Anzac Memories,” in *Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (New York: Routledge, 1998), 245.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, 250.

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, 249.

<sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*, 252.

<sup>57</sup>Mark Roseman, “Surviving Memory: Truth and Inaccuracy in Holocaust Memory,” in *Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (New York: Routledge, 1998), 234.

Ellenbogen described how she devised a plan to escape from the Gestapo when they came to force her family to leave their home and go to a concentration camp in 1943.<sup>58</sup> At the age of 20, Ellenbogen asked her father if she could take her brother with her.<sup>59</sup> He agreed. When she asked her brother if he would like to escape with her, however, he refused.<sup>60</sup> She waited for an opportune moment to escape: “When the two Nazi officials went down to the cellar to inspect the loot the family had in their packing cases, Marianne saw her chance.”<sup>61</sup> She ran down the steps in her home and out the back door.<sup>62</sup>

Ellenbogen’s account of her escape, however, conflicts with accounts of it from other sources. For example, the Gestapo account states that Ellenbogen asked the Gestapo officers, while she was upstairs with her parents, if she could go downstairs “to get food for the journey.” When she got downstairs, she ran out the back door and left. Another witness who met Ellenbogen after the war corroborated the Gestapo’s version.<sup>63</sup> Roseman argues that the inaccuracy in Ellenbogen’s account of this traumatic event reveals her desire to control how people perceived her. She felt guilty for leaving her family behind, so she created an account that portrayed her in a selfless light. As Roseman writes, “The discrepancies suggested that where her experience had been most traumatic, the trauma resulted in an inability to cope with memory as it was, a pressure that led, on the one hand, to an unwillingness to communicate about it to the

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<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 236.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid.

outside world, and, on the other, to the process of subtle modification.”<sup>64</sup> In other words, Roseman suggests that Ellenbogen changed her story as a way to cope with this traumatic event.

“Surviving Memory” and “Anzac Memories” highlight how stressful experiences impact individuals and illustrate how individuals process traumatic experiences in ways that help them best address these experiences. Drawing on these resources, I examine the psychological cost of the war on African American servicemen through their oral history testimonies. As Alessandro Portelli states, oral sources “tell us a good deal about the psychological cost” of particular events on individual people.<sup>65</sup> This insight into their psychological states reveals how events, people, and organizations influence individuals. According to Portelli, “the diversity of oral history consists in the fact that ‘wrong’ statements are still psychologically ‘true’ and that this truth may be equally as important as factually reliable accounts.”<sup>66</sup> Hence, the psychological aspect of an interview is as valuable to the interviewee as the facts that emerge from the interview. Oral testimony will thus uncover not only what African American servicemen did during the war but also how it affected them. The war’s impact on the psyche of African American soldiers matters because it reveals the psychological damage the war inflicted.

In addition to oral history testimonies uncovering the effects of the Korean War on the psyche of African American soldiers, oral history testimonies help historians connect with communities that are marginalized. Historians’ use of oral history testimonies gives people

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<sup>64</sup>Ibid., 238.

<sup>65</sup>Alessandro Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different,” in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (New York: Routledge, 1998), 37.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid.

situated on the periphery of society a voice.<sup>67</sup> As Paul Thompson put it in “The Voice of the Past: Oral History,” oral history “allows heroes not just from the leaders, but also from the unknown majority of the people.”<sup>68</sup> By giving a voice to the less powerful, traditional historical narratives are challenged, and new ways of viewing people, places, and events within history emerge.

Nonetheless, there are a few dilemmas with using oral history methodology. According to Michael Frisch, in “Oral History and Hard Times,” oral history has typically fallen into two categories: “more history” or “no history.”<sup>69</sup> More history “functions as a source of historical information and insights, to be used, in traditional ways, in the formulation of historical generalizations and narratives.”<sup>70</sup> Simply put, more history means that oral history can be used to reinforce conventional historical arguments. Books such as *Black Soldier, White Army* use oral testimony in conjunction with other sources, including surveys, to reinforce the argument that African American soldiers from the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment underperformed. *Black Soldier, White Army*'s use of oral history testimonies is an example of a more history approach to using oral history that fails to employ oral history testimony to its full potential. In doing a more history approach, Bowers, Hammond, and MacGarrigle minimize the subjectivity of oral testimonies.

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<sup>67</sup>Paul Thompson, “The Voice of the Past: Oral History,” in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (New York: Routledge, 1998), 31.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid.

<sup>69</sup>Michael Frisch, “Oral History and Hard Times: A Review Essay,” in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (New York: Routledge, 1998), 33.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., 32-33.

No history, on the other hand, suggests that oral histories “can be understood as a way of bypassing historical interpretation itself, avoiding all the attendant elitist and contextual dangers.”<sup>71</sup> Since oral histories are interviews, they “provide a way to communicate with the past more directly, to be presented with a somehow purer image of direct experience.”<sup>72</sup> With no history, oral testimonies are not put into context and analyzed. However, without background on the oral history testimonies, the value of the oral history testimony is minimal. Simply put, “the undervaluing and the overvaluing of oral sources end up by cancelling out specific qualities, turning these sources either into mere supports for traditional specific qualities, or into an illusory cure for all ills.”<sup>73</sup> Hence, more history and no history alike fail to use oral history methodology effectively.

Oral testimony used for this dissertation will avoid both of these problematic categories by instead using oral history testimony to give African American soldiers a real voice within the historical narrative on the Korean War. Oral history testimonies have embedded within them their own subjectivity.<sup>74</sup> Because an interviewee’s perspective is within his or her oral history testimony, a degree of bias is embedded in oral testimonies. During an interview between the historian and interviewee, a narrative is created.<sup>75</sup> In this case, the oral history interviewee becomes the historian, and the historian, in turn, becomes a part of the source.<sup>76</sup> The partiality of

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<sup>71</sup>Ibid.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid.

<sup>73</sup>Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different,” 33.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., 40.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid.

the interviewer and the interviewee creates a confrontation that creates new ways of viewing the historical event.<sup>77</sup> As a result of this conflict, new details emerge that provide a deeper understanding of the subject matter.

Despite the benefits of using oral history accounts for this dissertation, this project faces several challenges as it seeks to provide a more authentic portrait of the African American experience during the Korean War. First, the dissertation relies upon roughly three dozen oral history testimonies from African American Korean War veterans. Only a handful of libraries have archives on Korean War veterans, and the majority of these interviews are with white soldiers. As a result, the number of oral history testimonies of African American soldiers from the war is limited. One consequence of this incomplete archive is that the patterns that emerge from the oral history testimonies used for this dissertation are not definitive. Thousands of African American soldiers served in the US military during the Korean War. Therefore, the roughly two dozen oral history testimonies used for this dissertation cannot be representative of the issues that African American soldiers faced. Second, while this dissertation discusses how private memories diverge from the public memory of African American soldiers from the Korean War in historiography, it will not compare private memories to other forms of public memory, such as movies or memorials. Third, this dissertation will concentrate on the experiences of African American soldiers during the Korean War. African American women who served during the Korean War will not be addressed. Furthermore, this dissertation juxtaposes oral history testimonies and autobiographies against historiographical arguments; I will not address the historical inaccuracies of movies, memorials, and magazines. Instead, I seek

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<sup>77</sup>Ibid., 41.

to show how oral history testimonies are a unique way to access the real experiences of African American soldiers during the Korean War era.

### **The Power and Potential of Private Memories of the Forgotten War**

*Forgotten Soldiers from a Forgotten War: Oral History Testimonies of African American Soldiers from the Korean War* draws on oral history testimonies of African American servicemen to illuminate the complexities of military service during the Korean War. This dissertation is divided into four chapters that each explores a different facet of military experience. In Chapter 1, entitled “Motivations,” I examine the reasons African Americans joined the US military during the Korean War. At the beginning of the Korean War, the US military was largely segregated and therefore inherently unfair. Nonetheless, 600,000 African Americans signed up for the US armed forces during the Korean War era.<sup>78</sup> It was a raw deal; these men risked their lives and received only unequal citizenship in return. Based on the oral history testimonies of African American men who enlisted during the Korean War, I trace such motivating reasons as environmental issues, family dynamics, and patriotism.

The various social, economic, and personal catalysts for enlistment set the stage for the subject of my second chapter: the men’s preparation for war. In contrast to the dominant historiography depicting African Americans in Korea as poor soldiers, in “Training Experiences,” I show how African American soldiers were in fact adequately trained. Some historians suggest that African American soldiers, especially from the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment, spent too much time entertaining themselves and others and not enough time preparing for war. They argue that these misplaced priorities put the Twenty-Fourth Infantry

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<sup>78</sup>African Americans in the Korean War – State of New Jersey, “The Beginnings of a New Era for African Americans in the Armed Forces,” <http://www.nj.gov/military/korea/factsheets/afroamer.html>

Regiment at a disadvantage when they went to Korea to fight. Oral history testimonies, however, provide a different view of the basic training experiences of African American soldiers who served during the Korean War. Understood through this lens, we can see that these men were highly motivated to fight and generally well-trained, but their effectiveness was hampered by racism.

In Chapter 3, “Combat Experiences,” I examine the military exploits of African Americans who fought in the Korean War. Many histories on African American servicemen during the Korean War highlight their experiences in general terms, leaving out key details. This chapter will analyze how historiography has framed the African American experience in combat. Specifically, I juxtapose historical narratives against oral history testimonies from African American soldiers from the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment and other fighting regiments, and autobiographies from African American soldiers who served in the war. In this chapter, I show how most historical accounts of the Korean War overlook the heroism and humanity of African Americans. Ultimately, this chapter reframes how history as a discipline represents African American servicemen from a top-down history to an egalitarian history that is infused with oral history testimony.

Finally, Chapter 4 analyzes the impact the Korean War had on African American Korean War veterans. The historical narrative highlights the impact the Korean War had on African American soldiers in a simplistic manner, leaving out key aspects on how the Korean War influenced African American soldiers. Oral history testimonies, on the other hand, provide insight into how the Korean War affected African American soldiers both negatively and positively. For example, I assess the significance of the dreams of African American soldiers

who served during the Korean War. Additionally, I examine the Korean War's impact on the relationships African American soldiers had with their families. Finally, this chapter provides an examination of the various methods the US military used to treat the emotional trauma African American soldiers suffered as a result of the war. Consequently, this chapter provides a comprehensive portrait on how the Korean War empowered some African American soldiers financially while simultaneously scarring some African American soldiers.

In effect, this dissertation challenges historiography's overall interpretation of the African American experience during the Korean War. Historiography fails to examine the various reasons African Americans enlisted in the US military, ignores how African American soldiers prepared for the Korean War, and overlooks the achievements of African American soldiers on the battlefield. Above all, the historical narrative fails to address the psychological impact the Korean War had on African American soldiers. To confront the status quo and more fully illuminate the African American experience during the Korean War, this dissertation draws on oral history testimonies from those who served. This dissertation is an attempt not just to expand the history of the Korean War, the Forgotten War, but also to give voice to the most forgotten individuals in that conflict: the African American soldiers who enlisted in a segregated military and nonetheless fought with dignity and strength.

## CHAPTER 1

### MOTIVATION TO ENLIST

The Korean War was the first war that integrated African Americans into the US military. In theory, Truman's Executive Order 9981 desegregated the US military; in practice, however, the US military was still largely segregated at the beginning of the Korean War. African American soldiers slept in separate barracks, ate in segregated cafeterias, and trained in all-black fighting units. In spite of the unequal treatment faced by African American soldiers, they still signed up to serve. While joining the US military did not appeal to every African American, many African Americans weighed the cost of serving in a segregated army with the free food, shelter, health care, and a steady income the US military offered them. After assessing the cost and benefits of joining the military, many African Americans decided joining the US armed forces was a better alternative to getting a low-wage job. Hence, a lack of job opportunities, a desire to emulate friends and family members and patriotism were driving forces behind why African Americans signed up for the military. When African Americans enlisted, they agreed to give everything, including their lives if necessary, and in exchange received unfair treatment from the US military.

African American soldiers signing up to serve in the US military despite being treated unfairly was not specific to the Korean War. During World War II, African Americans faced the same issue. The Black press and civil rights organizations during the World War II era discussed how participation in the war effort would affect African Americans. At the start of World War II,

African Americans were largely segregated from white soldiers. Jim Crow laws ensured African American soldiers ate in separate cafeterias, slept in separate barracks, and fought in separate fighting units. The black press wanted to put an end to the separation of African American and white soldiers in the US military. Black newspapers argued African Americans had to be full participants in the war effort “if they were to successfully claim the right to full equality in American society.”<sup>1</sup> Organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) made a similar point. The NAACP “used its paper, *Crisis*, to induce black Americans to serve in the war effort by equating defense of the country with full citizenship rights.”<sup>2</sup> Hence, the black press and civil rights organizations employed their social capital to mobilize African Americans to sign up for the US military in hopes of ending institutionalized racism within the United States.

While some of the black press argued African American participation in World War II would secure equality for African Americans, other members of the press believed that African Americans should fight in the war to remain free. Journalist J. Saunders Redding’s “A Negro Looks at the War” frames African Americans as a free people who should defend their freedom by serving in the US military.<sup>3</sup> Redding states, “The very fact that I, a Negro in America, can fight against the evils in America is worth fighting for.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, Redding believed

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<sup>1</sup>Bryan D. Booker, *African Americans in the United States Army in World War II* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, Inc., Publishers, 2008), 53.

<sup>2</sup>Maggi M. Morehouse, *Fighting in the Jim Crow Army: Black Men and Women Remember World War II* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), 9.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 8. Neil A. Wynn. *The African American Experience during World War II* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010). Wynn’s book suggests that some African Americans believed participation in the US military would not improve life for African American soldiers. According to Wynn, “African Americans

African Americans' ability to protest against inequality was a freedom that merited them signing up for the US military to protect it. While Redding's argument was not widely embraced by the African American community, his explanation of why African Americans should fight in World War II highlights the diversity of opinion on African American participation in the US military that was represented in the black press.

Just as individuals and groups encouraged African Americans to enlist despite being treated poorly by the US military during World War II, the Korean War witnessed civil rights organizations and leaders persuading African Americans to join the US military. The NAACP "fervently and without question backed the call to arms."<sup>5</sup> Organizations such as the Colored War Veterans of America called upon men who previously fought to return to duty to fight in the Korean War.<sup>6</sup> Prominent civil rights leaders, including A. Philip Randolph, similarly advocated for the war effort.<sup>7</sup> These organizations and individuals viewed the Korean War as an opportunity. They believed African American soldiers serving in the US armed forces would advance the cause of equality within the US military and beyond.

Though oral history testimonies and historiography highlight many of the same reasons African Americans joined the US military, private memories provide more details than historiography offers. The dominant historical narrative suggests the financial incentives offered by the US military attracted many African American soldiers to join. Private memories provide a wider range of explanations on why African American soldiers joined the US military juxtaposed

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questioned what another war would bring for them, and remembering the events of 1917 to 1919, they answered, 'Nothing!'" (23).

<sup>5</sup>Knauer, *Let Us Fight as Free Men*, 134.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

to the dominant narrative.<sup>8</sup> Despite this, oral history testimonies used for this dissertation do pose a problem. The small number of African American soldiers within the pool of oral history testimonies highlighted within this dissertation disproportionately reflects the population of African American soldiers who served honorably in the US military during the Korean War era. Nevertheless, private memories fill a gap left by historiography by underscoring the influence of people and places on African American Korean War veterans.

Private memories reveal four general categories of motivations for signing up for the military: economic improvement, self-improvement, the influence of family and friends, and patriotism and the draft. I begin by providing a brief survey of the cultural and economic forces shaping life for the African American men who would ultimately serve in the military during the Korean War. Because the vast majority of African American soldiers were in either their late teens or early twenties when they enlisted during the Korean War, this chapter will focus on the 1930s and 1940s. By revealing the social and economic forces that inspired some African American soldiers to enlist, private memories add nuance to historiography's explanation for why African Americans signed up for the US military.

Private memories offer insight into the motivations of future African American soldiers who participated in the Korean War. Examples of private memories include autobiographies such as Colonel Charles M. Bussey's *Firefight at Yechon* and oral history testimonies from the

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<sup>8</sup>Popular Memory Group, "Popular Memory: Theory, Politics, Method," in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (New York: Routledge Publishing, 1998), 44-46. The article, among other points, suggests that public memory creates "the field of public representations of history" (44). A *dominant memory* is created through public memory that "points to the power and pervasiveness of historical representations, their connections with dominant institutions, and the part they play in winning consent and building alliances in the process of formal politics" (44). A second way of looking at social production of memory is entitled *private memory*. Private memories can be letters, diaries, or photograph albums (45). The article suggests that both public and private memories must be present in memory (46).

Library of Congress and the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum. These archives offer insights into why individual African American soldiers enlisted and provide a window into the multivariant forces that encouraged African American soldiers to enlist. Above all, oral history testimonies from these archives challenge the conventional historiography that asserts African Americans joined the US military primarily to improve their socioeconomic status.

One element of oral history testimonies that provides insight into the motivations to enlist is moral language. *Moral language* is the use of words and phrases that indicate how individuals view themselves in relation to their moral standard.<sup>9</sup> For instance, a soldier stating he felt depressed because he failed to help a fellow soldier fight would underscore this particular soldier's value system. In this scenario, according to this soldier's moral standard, a good soldier would help rescue his fellow soldier, even if it meant putting his life in danger. By attending to the moral language used in some interviews, I will understand how some interviewees evaluated their performance as soldiers within the context of their unique moral code.<sup>10</sup>

The oral history archive of African American veterans of the Korean War offers a wealth of explanations for why they chose to enlist. However, the historical narrative narrowly and, sometimes, inaccurately portrays their motivations to serve. Therefore, this chapter focuses on interviews and autobiographies to supplement and, at times, contradict the principal findings of the public archive. Drawing on eleven oral history testimonies taken from personal interviews I conducted with African American veterans of the Korean War, I detail the various economic,

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<sup>9</sup>Kathryn Anderson and Dana Jack, "Learning to Listen," in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (New York: Routledge, 1998), 137.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

societal, and cultural pressures that encouraged African American soldiers to join the US military.

### **Contextualizing African American Military Service in the Korean War**

Integrating the military was not a panacea for America's long struggle with racism. The 1930s were a formative time for future African American soldiers of the Korean War, who would have been under ten years old during that time. The culture of the 1930s shaped the lens through which these young and impressionable men viewed the world. Jim Crow segregation influenced almost every facet of American society during the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>11</sup> The Supreme Court ruled on *Brown v. Board of Education*, the landmark decision that overturned the doctrine of "separate but equal," not until 1954, a year after the Korean War ended.

Jim Crow ensured that blacks and whites lived in separate communities, ate in separate cafeterias, and used different restrooms.<sup>12</sup> Blacks received inferior public education and low-quality health care.<sup>13</sup> In addition, since African Americans were considered second-class citizens, whites received "disproportionate access to public monies" as compared to African Americans.<sup>14</sup> According to Cheryl Greenberg in *To Ask for an Equal Chance*, "Every dollar white legislators shortchanged a black school or hospital gained that much more for a white facility."<sup>15</sup> By underfunding African American hospitals and schools to provide more to their white constituents, various levels of government withheld essential resources and materials from

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<sup>11</sup>Cheryl Greenberg, *To Ask for an Equal Chance: African Americans in the Great Depression* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009), 3.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

African Americans. This disparity in resource allocation had implications for African Americans in civil society and in the military. Future African American soldiers attended schools that lacked resources and relied on ill-equipped hospitals. Indeed, this lack of preparation and available resources would indirectly affect their performance during the Korean War. Nonetheless, even as their government shortchanged them on basic essential services, many African American soldiers sought to serve their country in wartime.

Among the various types of racism African American soldiers faced, racism within the electoral process was arguably the most devastating. Prejudice at the polls ensured that many African Americans were denied their constitutional right to vote. Greenberg notes that the “exclusion of black people from the polls through literary tests, poll taxes, grandfather clauses, fraud, and intimidation” guaranteed that whites “controlled the government at the municipal, state, and federal levels and therefore determined the allocation of public spending.”<sup>16</sup> These tactics reduced the number of African Americans who were eligible to vote. Above all, these maneuvers safeguarded the power whites had amassed in government.

In addition to disenfranchisement, discrimination against African Americans took other more insidious forms. Popular culture played a role in promoting racist ideology against African Americans. American movies and radio broadcasts spread stereotypes of African Americans. Both media frequently depicted African Americans as uncivilized, barbaric, and simple-minded, thereby reinforcing racist notions of white supremacy in their viewers and listeners. As Gena Caponi-Tabery argues, “Jungle films like *Tarzan the Ape Man* (1932) and *King Kong* (1933)

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

sought to demonstrate white supremacy in Africa as well as the United States.”<sup>17</sup> Caponi-Tabery further contends films such as *Gone with the Wind* (1939) “showed blacks as comic household retainers who had been happy and content in their former slave condition.”<sup>18</sup> Radio shows such as *Amos and Andy*, popular in the 1930s, perpetuated racist stereotypes of African Americans by providing “caricatures of African American life.”<sup>19</sup> The impact of these racist depictions was twofold. On the one hand, these films and radio shows conditioned white Americans to be racist. On the other hand, African American troops who served in the Korean War had also likely listened to these radio shows and watched these movies as children. For these servicemen, popular culture created and reflected the racist sentiments that prevailed in the 1930s and 1940s. Young soldiers and sailors who enlisted during the Korean War did so with full knowledge that white American society, to judge by their taste in film and radio, saw African Americans as less than human.

In addition to racism, African Americans faced the threat of financial insecurity in the wake of the Great Depression of the 1930s. Most Black Americans already lived at or near poverty before the stock market collapsed, so they felt the effects of the Great Depression to a greater extent than other ethnic groups did.<sup>20</sup> According to Kevern Verney in *Black Civil Rights in America*, in mid-sized cities such as Pittsburgh in 1931, “40 percent of African Americans

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<sup>17</sup>Gena Caponi-Tabery, *Jump for Joy: Jazz, Basketball and Black Culture in 1930s America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008), 36.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Kevern Verney, *Black Civil Rights in America* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 24.

were homeless and unemployed.”<sup>21</sup> African Americans in other cities across the country also suffered from high levels of unemployment. Verney describes the overwhelming levels of poverty: “In 1932 30 percent of blacks in Chicago were out of work, 37 percent in Detroit, 33 percent in Cleveland, 28 percent in Philadelphia and 25 percent in New York City.”<sup>22</sup> Due to high unemployment, many families of future African American servicemen in the Korean War struggled to survive. These economic struggles encouraged some African Americans to consider enlistment in the US military as a viable option.

The Great Depression not only affected African Americans who lived in urban centers, but it also devastated African Americans who lived in rural communities. For many African Americans who lived in the countryside, farming was their only source of income. African Americans harvested foods such as tomatoes, corn, and wheat and sold these foods for a profit. The Great Depression decreased the amount of money black farmers made from selling fruits and vegetables relative to their white counterparts.<sup>23</sup> According to Greenberg, by 1930, “the number of black farm owners had already fallen 5 percent and their total acreage by almost 10 percent. The value of their land had declined by more than a third.”<sup>24</sup> While Black farmers suffered, however, some White farmers thrived. As Greenberg notes, “The number of black farmers who owned or managed their own farms had dropped from a quarter of all black agricultural workers to less than 15 percent,” whereas the number of farms owned by whites

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Greenberg, *To Ask for an Equal Chance: African Americans in the Great Depression*, 22.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

increased significantly.<sup>25</sup> A principal effect of this change in ownership was the severe reduction of money flowing into African American communities. With less money flowing into the African American communities, they strained to pay for food and housing.

In addition to African Americans struggling to pay for basic necessities during the Great Depression, the economic crisis also limited the types of jobs available to them. Specifically, African Americans were less likely to work in specialized occupations. Becoming a lawyer, doctor, or teacher required spending time and money on education. Many African Americans who lost their jobs and their businesses believed getting a professional degree was onerous and out of reach. Instead, they spent their hard-earned money on the essentials—food, clothes, and health care. The inaccessibility of higher education adversely affected the number of professionals within the African American community. According to Greenberg, “As late as 1940, only 2 percent of all doctors in the United States were black—a 10 percent decline from 1930. Black nurses constituted less than 2 percent of all nurses. Among lawyers, less than 1 percent were African American.”<sup>26</sup> Since fewer African Americans became professionals during the Great Depression and immediately following it, the number of African Americans in high-paying jobs decreased. The lack of jobs available to African Americans undoubtedly had an impact on future African American soldiers who would serve in the Korean War. Faced with these limitations of resources and education, young African American men were uniquely positioned to consider enlistment as a way to economic independence.

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 32.

### **Military Service as an Economic Opportunity**

The poor economic prospects for some African Americans left them with few options for providing for themselves and their families. Together, disenfranchisement, stereotypes in popular culture, and economic struggles as a result of the Great Depression all made it difficult for African Americans to secure employment throughout the 1930s and 1940s. As a result, a significant number of African Americans enlisted in the US military for financial reasons. As historiography has shown and private memories corroborate, joining the military was the best option for many African Americans during the Korean War era.

Kimberley Phillips and Michael Green have both written about African American soldiers who joined the US military for financial and social gain. In *War: What Is It Good For?* Phillips asserts that after World War II, the US military was seen by some African Americans as a means to secure a steady job. Phillips suggests that President Truman's Executive Order 9981 provided "economic incentives offered by the military" that appealed to "working class African Americans."<sup>27</sup> The potential of receiving a free education made joining the US military an attractive option for many.<sup>28</sup>

Phillips draws on George Lipsitz's *A Life in Struggle: Ivory Perry and the Culture of Opposition* to describe how African American soldiers overcame their hardships by joining the

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<sup>27</sup>Kimberley Phillips, *War: What Is It Good For?* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 114. Ransom Wayman, a World War II veteran, is highlighted in the book as an example of an African American who viewed the job of a soldier as superior to alternative job opportunities available to him. According to *War: What Is It Good For?* Wayman was "shot six times, captured by the Chinese army, and nearly executed. Wayman weighed the army against the options he found in Detroit. He did not particularly like the army, but he considered it a better job than any other he had held" (114). *Let Us Fight as Free Men* argues a similar point by suggesting that the US military was the only means by which some African Americans could escape poverty and support their families.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

US military.<sup>29</sup> For example, Phillips highlights the motivations of Ivory Perry, an eighteen-year-old from Pine Bluff, Arkansas.<sup>30</sup> Perry struggled to find employment after his mother passed away and his father left, so he went to his older sister and her husband for employment.<sup>31</sup> Along with a cousin, Perry picked cotton and worked low-wage jobs.<sup>32</sup> Frustrated with these jobs, Perry and his cousin signed up for the army.<sup>33</sup> Perry's story supports Phillips's claim that African Americans joined the US military to improve their quality of life. Indeed, from Perry's perspective, the military provided him with "steady income and room and board" at a time when financial security was elusive at best.<sup>34</sup>

Phillips uses the story of Willie Ruff, another African American Korean War veteran, to reaffirm her point that the US military helped African Americans survive economically. Ruff joined "to support his younger siblings and pay for medical care. With the new G.I. Bill, Ruff applied to Yale College and received a scholarship."<sup>35</sup> In the introduction, I distinguished between more history, which suggests that interviews are used to support arguments unrelated to oral history testimony, and no history, which suggests oral history testimonies are presented without context. Phillips's more history approach takes the stories of Perry and Ruff and uses them to support her claim that the US military provided African Americans with incentives that

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<sup>29</sup>George Lipsitz, *A Life in Struggle: Ivory Perry and the Culture of Opposition*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 39-41.

<sup>30</sup>Phillips, *War: What Is It Good For?*, 112.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 113-14.

improved the quality of their lives. Through Phillips's more history approach, the emotions and feelings of Perry and Ruff are not taken into account as they sought to secure employment.

Consequently, Phillips's book portrayal of African American soldiers who signed up for the US military during the Korean War era is one-dimensional.

In *Black Yanks in the Pacific*, Michael Green provides nuance to Phillips's assertions about how military service improved the quality of life for African Americans. Green argues the US military enhanced the quality of life of African American Korean War veterans in a variety of different ways. According to Green, "the American military offered what American civilian society would not: decent wages, low-cost housing, adequate health care, affordable commodities, and job security."<sup>36</sup> While Phillips argues that African Americans enlisted as a means to secure employment, Green explores how the US government and friends and family members often pressured African American men to enlist. In *Black Yanks in the Pacific*, he uses the oral history testimony of Norvel West, a Korean War veteran, to highlight the social expectations that drove West to join the US military. West felt like enlistment was his only option, stating, "Once you graduated from high school, [you went] into the service."<sup>37</sup> West enumerated two reasons for his enlistment: his older brother was drafted and "older acquaintances" had volunteered.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Green uses Jessie Brown's story to make the point that friends and family influenced some African Americans to enlist. For example, Brown suggested that he signed up for the military because he "came 'from an army family."<sup>39</sup> Brown's

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<sup>36</sup>Michael Green, *Black Yanks in the Pacific* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 10.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 21.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

father, a World War I veteran, and his three brothers, all veterans of World War II, inspired Brown to sign up. According to Green, “Brown decided that family tradition, in addition to the chance of being called to serve anyway, left little option but to enlist.”<sup>40</sup> Green uses the stories of West and Brown to argue that pressure from family and friends factored into the decision of some African Americans to join the US military during the Korean War.

In addition to avoiding poverty or responding to social pressures, literature on the African American experience during the Korean War indicates some African Americans enlisted to get away from local police. For example, Green contends some African Americans signed up for the military as a way to avoid being arrested.<sup>41</sup> Green uses Clentell Jackson’s story that took place in Minneapolis, Minnesota, to illustrate this point. Jackson had no plans to join the US military but felt forced to enlist after a white woman claimed she had nonconsensual sexual relations with one or more African American men.<sup>42</sup> Jackson was unfamiliar with the woman, but his name came up during the police investigation.<sup>43</sup> As Jackson said, “We were scared.”<sup>44</sup> Miscegenation laws, which made marriages between blacks and whites illegal, were still being enforced in the 1940s and ’50s.<sup>45</sup> These laws forbid African Americans and whites from having sexual relations. So, in spite of his innocence, Jackson could have been sent to jail, or vigilantes could have hunted him down and hurt or killed him in revenge. Jackson later stated, “The cops were picking

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 21-22.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 22.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

<sup>45</sup>Charles Robinson, *Dangerous Liaisons: Sex and Love in the Segregated South* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2003), 141.

up everybody ... [and] our word wouldn't hold for anything."<sup>46</sup> Jackson and his friends initially hid at an ice skating arena while local police in St. Paul, Minnesota, conducted a house-to-house search.<sup>47</sup> The next morning, Jackson, along with some of his friends, snuck down to the local recruiting station and joined the military.<sup>48</sup> This story highlights how racism within local law enforcement influenced some African Americans to enlist.

While public memories such as Michael Green's *Black Yanks in the Pacific* and Kimberly Phillips's *War: What Is It Good For?* provide some reasons African American soldiers enlisted in the US military during the Korean War era, they ignore the wider range of motivations behind African Americans signing up. Private memories fill this void left by historiography. Green and Phillips both use oral history testimony to support their arguments. As a result, the historians do not properly tap the oral history testimonies to go into detail regarding the reasons African American soldiers signed up for the US military. Private memories, however, paint a more vivid portrait of why African Americans joined the US military than does historiography's reductive narrative of African American soldiers' reasons for enlisting.

### **Military Service as an Opportunity for Personal Growth**

While historiography highlights the economic incentives the US military offered to African American soldiers, private memories widen the scope on the economic advantages African American soldiers received by enlisting. I draw on oral history testimonies conducted for this dissertation, the Library of Congress's oral history testimonies, and the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum Veterans Remember Oral History Archive to provide insight

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<sup>46</sup>Green, *Black Yanks in the Pacific*, 22.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

into the private memories of African American Korean War veterans. These archives indicate that some African Americans viewed the armed forces as an opportunity to improve their standing in society through steady employment and access to free education.

Signing up for the US military to access free education is often highlighted in oral history testimonies of African American Korean War veterans. Leroy Williams joined the military on August 8, 1947.<sup>49</sup> According to Williams, “When I graduated from Robert Smalls High School in Beaufort County, South Carolina, in 1947, having no resources to go to college, I convinced my mother to let me volunteer for the army.”<sup>50</sup> By joining the army, Williams was able to secure health care, housing, and a paycheck. Joining the army gave him access to otherwise inaccessible resources. Roy Dell Johnson, a Korean War veteran and recipient of three Purple Hearts, joined the army for similar reasons. Johnson wanted to get a free education. As he put it, “I wanted, uh, college education, and I knew that if I’d gone into the military for three years [I would get] a degree, and it will be paid for by the United States.”<sup>51</sup> Leroy Williams and Roy Dell Johnson’s oral history testimonies indicate the US military enhanced their quality of life in the short term and gave them access to a brighter future.

In addition to providing African American soldiers access to resources that improved their lives, joining the US military gave them an opportunity to escape poverty. Curtis Morrow, a Korean War veteran from the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment, recalls his family’s tenuous socioeconomic status. Born in Chicago in 1933, Morrow grew up in poverty, and his mother struggled to feed seven children. Morrow said his family suffered because his father had trouble

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<sup>49</sup>Leroy Williams, interviewed by Hattie Lowry. Personal Interview, Augusta, Georgia, June 10, 2003.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid.

<sup>51</sup>Roy Dell Johnson, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Arlington, Texas, March 2, 2015.

finding stable employment. As a result, Morrow's family moved often in search of jobs, living in Chicago and Buchanan, Michigan, where he went to grammar school.<sup>52</sup> Moving from Chicago to Buchanan disrupted Morrow's friendships and impaired his learning process.

Staying in one school has numerous benefits for students. They are able to develop lasting friendships, and they can grow and learn within the educational system provided at their school. Morrow's family's inability to stay in one place for a significant period of time negatively affected his education. Morrow attended three different elementary schools: Phillips, Doolittle, and Drake. His education was filled with gaps, and he dropped out before reaching high school.<sup>53</sup> If Morrow came from a family that was more financially stable, he may have continued with his education.<sup>54</sup>

The consequences of Morrow's father's inconsistent employment extended far beyond his primary school education. Frequently moving disrupted Morrow's ability to form childhood friendships. With a limited education, Morrow had few options for achieving financial security himself. In light of these limitations, Morrow told his mother he thought he "would be of more help to her and to the family if [he] joined the service."<sup>55</sup> In his mind, joining the US military and offering his mother part of his paycheck would make it easier for his mother to provide for their

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<sup>52</sup>Curtis Morrow, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Chicago, Illinois, January 7, 2015.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid. Curtis Morrow's family migrated north looking for work. Migrating was not without risk. Sharecroppers (a system that required tenant farmers to give a certain portion of crops they harvested to the landowner) ran the risk of being arrested if they left their farm. Morrow's family "had to actually run away from the sharecroppers' farms, from the farm that they were working on." Morrow stated that if they were caught, landowners could "put them (African Americans) in prison or force them back because they claimed that they owned them." Morrow's father hitched a ride on a freight train headed north. Taking the train was dangerous because "overseers would be searching those cars, so you got to figure out a way to conceal yourself, at least until the train got out of that particular area." In spite of these dangers, Morrow's family safely arrived in Chicago.

family. More history and no history overlook how poverty influenced some African American soldiers to sign up for the US military. Private memories, unlike public memories, provide context on how the socioeconomic conditions of young African American men in cities, both large and small, during the 1930s and 1940s would ultimately direct them to military service in the Korean War.

Like some African American soldiers, such as Curtis Morrow, oral history testimonies also reveal that some white soldiers signed up to increase the amount of money they made. James Creviston, for instance, dropped out of high school “because of family hardships and got a job washing dishes at the St. Nicholas Hotel.”<sup>56</sup> He eventually left the St. Nicholas Hotel and went to wash dishes at Hotel Leland. To get extra money, he also joined the National Guard at the age of 16, even though he was technically too young to serve.<sup>57</sup> According to Creviston, “I just turned sixteen, and it was a couple of months after that, and I was a little large for my age, so I got away with it.”<sup>58</sup> Despite being too young to serve, Creviston signed up for the US military for economic reasons. Creviston’s oral history suggests that white soldiers, like their African American counterparts, sometimes joined the US military for financial gain.

In addition to using the US military to get away from poverty, some African Americans enlisted to escape violence. Eugene Brazier, who served in the US Army during the Korean War, endured severe poverty as he grew up. Like Curtis Morrow, Brazier’s family was forced to move frequently to areas that offered jobs. “I moved from Alabama to Detroit, and from Detroit to

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<sup>56</sup>James Creviston, interviewed by Lee Patton. Personal Interview, January 28, 2008, Springfield, Illinois.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid.

Chicago.”<sup>59</sup> Brazier’s life was tough. His family struggled to stay afloat financially and ultimately relied upon the government for money and vouchers for food.<sup>60</sup> Brazier’s childhood, however, was marked by violence as well as by poverty. For Brazier, “street gangs and nice guys” were fixtures within his community.<sup>61</sup> Due to the high level of violence, Brazier “had gotten into a couple of scrapes” growing up that required law enforcement to intervene.<sup>62</sup> With few options to move up socially in his hometown, Brazier looked for an opportunity to leave his community. He suggested during his interview that joining the military gave his life meaning as it provided him with a chance to serve his country. Like Curtis Morrow and others, the armed forces gave Brazier an opportunity to flee from his community and start a new life.

### **Influenced to Join by Family and Friends**

The possibility of escaping poverty or starting a new life was just one motivation for African Americans to join the military during the Korean War. Others were prompted by peer pressure from within their families and their communities to enlist. One example of the family’s influence on a soldier’s decision to sign up for the US military is James Williams, a machine gunner in the Korean War. Williams came from a family with a proud military history. Williams enlisted in the armed forces after witnessing friends and family join the army. Williams’s grandfather, with whom he lived, had served in World War I.<sup>63</sup> The next generation of Williams’s family served as well. According to Williams, he had a lot of uncles who served. He

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<sup>59</sup>Eugene Brazier, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Chicago, Illinois, January 5, 2015.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid.

<sup>63</sup>James Williams, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Chicago, Illinois, January 12, 2015.

said that “when World War II [began], they was all in that, about 12 or 13 of them.”<sup>64</sup>

Additionally, World War II was interwoven into the fabric of Williams’s life. He spent time “around these old soldiers, and that’s all they ever talked about, and everything was on the news during the war. Everybody’s mind was on the war.”<sup>65</sup> Williams’s statement suggests some African American soldiers signed up for the military because they wanted to emulate older peers.

Interactions with family members in military locations inspired some Korean War veterans to join. Eugene Lloyd, for example, decided to join the military after spending time with his uncle at West Point. Lloyd’s uncle was a master sergeant at the US Military Academy.<sup>66</sup> As Lloyd recalled, his uncle “showed [him] all the grounds and everything” at the academy.<sup>67</sup> Lloyd’s trip to the prestigious institution inspired him. In particular, Lloyd was moved by the physical fitness and academic standards of the esteemed institution. More than fifty years later, Lloyd maintained his enthusiasm for the military. When discussing the principles the US military embodied by the academy, Lloyd emphatically stated, “Well, I believe.”<sup>68</sup> In other words, Lloyd embraced the values of the US military after his experience with his uncle at West Point. After interacting with the students, faculty, and staff at the school, Lloyd was convinced he wanted to be a part of the armed forces. His enlistment was a direct result of spending time with his uncle at a military institution that trained leaders for the US military.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>64</sup>Ibid.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid.

<sup>66</sup>Eugene Lloyd, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Chicago, Illinois, February 13, 2015.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid.

Others, such as Jesse Jenkins, were moved to join the US military because of a family friend.<sup>70</sup> Due to the gregarious, outgoing nature of the Jenkins family, they had many friends who would visit them. Jenkins's interaction with a family friend who served in the Ghent Cavalry changed his life. Andrew Young, an African American soldier, came to visit the Jenkins family when Jesse Jenkins was eight years old. During Young's visit, Jenkins became "impressed by him, his stature, his uniform, and everything."<sup>71</sup> As a result of his interaction with Young, Jenkins decided he wanted to join the US military.<sup>72</sup> When Jenkins reached the age of eighteen, he enlisted.

Even as oral testimony reveals idolization of friends or family members as a motivating factor for some African American soldiers to join the US military, anger or lack of respect drove others to enlist. James Lacy's poor relationship with his father motivated him to leave home by joining the military. Lacy was born into a middle-class, two-parent home. His father built houses in San Antonio, Texas.<sup>73</sup> According to Lacy, "When I was old enough, I worked for my father building homes."<sup>74</sup> Although Lacy put in long hours, his father refused to pay him. "He would pay the other men working for him, but he would not pay me. I had to work Saturday, Sunday,

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<sup>70</sup>Jesse Jenkins, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Crown Point, Indiana, February 18, 2015. *Firefight at Yechon*, by Lieutenant Colonel Charles M. Bussey, indicates how important a family friend was in encouraging him to join the US military. Long before Lieutenant Colonel Bussey served in the Korean War, his desire to join the army had been established. Bussey's relationship with an African American veteran of the Civil War, Sergeant Caldwell, sparked Bussey's curiosity and ultimately inspired him to enlist. Sergeant Caldwell served in the Civil War as a Union soldier and also fought against Indians, Mexicans, and Spaniards. As Bussey wrote, Sergeant Caldwell and others had "chased Pancho Villa, and they had brought Geronimo back from Mexico to the reservation." These stories made an impression on Bussey. As a result, Bussey "vowed to become a soldier."

<sup>71</sup>Ibid.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid.

<sup>73</sup>James Lacy, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Chicago, Illinois, January 20, 2015.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid.

and holidays, and after school, working for him.”<sup>75</sup> As a result of this disparate treatment, Lacy became resentful. Finally, Lacy told his father, “If I don’t start getting some kind of money, I’m going to run away.”<sup>76</sup> In an interview conducted over fifty years later, Lacy remained bitter with his father, suggesting the impact of this unfair power dynamic on his decision to enlist. The moral language Lacy used in the aforementioned quote indicates he believed his father betrayed him, because he was not financially compensated for his work.

Indeed, Lacy’s emotional response to his father’s refusal to compensate him for work he had done reveals his moral code. By taking into consideration Lacy’s point of view, his moral language revealed his value system.<sup>77</sup> According to Kathryn Anderson and Dana Jack in “Learning to Listen,” listening to the moral language of a person reveals “both the standards used to judge the self and the source of their despair.”<sup>78</sup> In Lacy’s case, his moral standard was based upon being treated fairly. If he did work, he expected to be paid for it. He viewed his father’s refusal to pay him for work as a violation of his moral code and decided it would be best if he ran away. According to Lacy, as a young man he thought, “As soon as I get old enough, I’m going to get away so that I could get a job making some money for myself.”<sup>79</sup> Later, he emphatically repeated that he “worked too hard working” for his father without pay.<sup>80</sup> These

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<sup>75</sup>Ibid.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid. James Allen, interviewed by Judith Kent. Personal Interview, Palm Coast, Florida, December 20, 2002. Like James Lacy, James Allen joined the US military to secure his independence. When Allen reached the age of 18, he moved out of his home and joined the US military.

<sup>77</sup>Kathryn Anderson and Dana Jack, “Learning to Listen,” in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (New York: Routledge, 1998), 137.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid.

phrases provide an emotional subtext that signifies Lacy's frustration with his father. Ultimately, this frustration and anger motivated him to join the armed forces.<sup>81</sup>

### **Patriotism and the Decision to Enlist**

African American soldiers' oral testimonies reveal a diverse set of reasons for joining the military. While some enlisted as a result of the influence of family and friends, others joined out of a sense of duty to protect their country. Patriotism, however, was not the most popular reason African American soldiers joined the US military. Racism in the United States during the late 1940s and early 1950s deterred many African Americans from embracing patriotism. Due to African Americans being treated as second-class citizens, some African Americans believed the United States did not deserve their support. Despite the anger some African Americans harbored, some African Americans still enlisted in the US military because of their patriotism. One veteran who was inspired by patriotism is John Thomas, who enlisted because he wanted to help his country win the Korean War. As Thomas stated, "I was a young feller about to graduate from high school, and I felt that I could do my country service by volunteering during the Korean War."<sup>82</sup> Men like John Thomas believed they had an obligation to help defend the United States.

The patriotism of some African American soldiers derived from a desire to protect their country from its enemies. Japan was a primary threat to the United States during the 1940s after destroying a significant portion of the US Navy at Pearl Harbor. Porche Taylor, a colonel in the US Army, was motivated to enlist after learning about the bombing raid. According to Taylor, he

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<sup>81</sup>Ibid.

<sup>82</sup>John Thomas, interviewed by Brianna Brooks. Personal Interview, Indianapolis, Indiana, October 4, 2009. Thomas also stated that he signed up for the army because he believed it would afford him an opportunity to travel more than other branches, such as the navy or the air force. Harold Brown, interviewed by Rebecca Wiggernhorn. Personal Interview, Beavercreek, Ohio, May 15, 2010. Brown joined the US military because he wanted to become a fighter pilot.

was sitting on the floor in his family's living room when he heard about the attack over the radio.<sup>83</sup> Taylor asked his father, "What is Pearl Harbor? Where is Pearl Harbor?"<sup>84</sup> Upon hearing his father's response, Taylor declared, "This is still my country. And although I have not reached 18 years of age yet, I am only 17, I got to get into this war. My country been attacked. I know this country has not been nice to us all these years, but I still got to go."<sup>85</sup> Despite Jim Crow laws that relegated African Americans to second-class citizens, Taylor's visceral response to the attack at Pearl Harbor reveals he still had a deep commitment to protect his country.

Taylor's response after hearing the United States had been attacked at Pearl Harbor was driven by his moral compass. When Taylor used the word "attack," he suggested the United States was violently confronted by the Japanese army. Further, he downplayed the effect of Jim Crow with his use of the phrase "not been nice" and its duration with "all these years." By minimizing the significance of Jim Crow, Taylor provided an opening for his patriotism to be expressed. Later, he reflected how deeply embedded his sense of patriotism was with the simple acknowledgment that he had "got to go." His usage of the phrase "got to go" revealed his moral standard, which centered upon a desire to help the United States defend itself against a foreign aggressor.

Taylor's socioeconomic status made possible his emotional response to the Japanese attack of Pearl Harbor. Unlike some African American soldiers who joined the military in order

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<sup>83</sup>Porche Taylor, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Richmond, Virginia, December 22, 2014.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid. When Taylor initially tried to enlist, he was rejected due to his age. The minimum age requirement to enter the US military was eighteen, and he was only seventeen years old. The army did allow young men to enlist if they got permission from their parents. However, Taylor's parents refused, so he had to wait another year before he could enlist.

to gain economic incentives, Taylor's upper-middle-class status allowed him to make an altruistic decision about joining. Taylor's family enjoyed a high standard of living. His family believed they had an obligation to help the community by exposing racism and inequality. His grandfather was a contractor who "could take a stick or a pencil and draw the most beautiful blueprints you ever seen."<sup>86</sup> Taylor's great-uncle, who was half white, "joined up" with his brother to build homes.<sup>87</sup> According to Taylor, his great-uncle financed the construction, and his grandfather actually built the houses.<sup>88</sup> Taylor noted "they got really rich" as they acquired numerous pieces of property.<sup>89</sup> In addition to real estate, Taylor's family became wealthy through their publishing company that exposed racism within their community. With money from her husband, Taylor's grandmother bought her son a publishing house. In turn, Taylor's father created the *Florida Tattler*, a newspaper that covered racial injustices faced by African American soldiers in Jacksonville, Florida. Taylor explained that his grandmother told her son, "I am going to put you up on Board Street, and you set up your own thing, and you do your thing. If you want to do a newspaper, you do it. I am going to put you up in the business."<sup>90</sup> With real estate he inherited from his family and his own printing press, Taylor's father was able to provide a good standard of living for his family. Consequently, the Taylor family's businesses gave them a degree of economic freedom other blacks did not have.

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<sup>86</sup>Ibid.

<sup>87</sup>Ibid.

<sup>88</sup>Ibid.

<sup>89</sup>Ibid.

<sup>90</sup>Ibid.

Because Taylor came from an upper-middle-class background, Taylor had the freedom to pursue a variety of different jobs. He could have worked with his family's printing press or managed and/or developed his family's construction company. Instead, Taylor decided to join the military. His desire to enlist in the US military was because he wanted to serve his country. Taylor's decision to join the US military provides insight into a larger trend within the motivations behind African American soldiers signing up for the US military. African Americans who came from poor or working-class backgrounds often joined the US military for financial gain. African Americans who came from wealthier backgrounds were not obligated to join the US military to survive. So, for men like Taylor, patriotism, not pragmatism, was the motivating factor behind joining the US military.

#### **Service Without a Choice: The Draft**

The draft was an undercurrent in every veteran's estimation of his likelihood of serving if he refused to enlist. Within the African American community during the Korean War, a number of men were drafted into the military. Of the eleven African American Korean War veterans interviewed for this dissertation, only eighteen percent were drafted: Homer Franklin and William Love. The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library Veterans Remembered Oral History Archive has only one interview with an African American Korean War veteran who was drafted. In spite of the small number of oral history testimonies that highlight the experiences of African American soldiers who were drafted, these oral history testimonies provide insight into their individual experiences joining the US military. Historiography provides only a brief description of African American soldiers getting drafted into the US military during the Korean War. Oral

history archives used for this dissertation provide more information on how African American soldiers viewed the draft.

Private memories of Korean War veterans indicate African American soldiers from all over the country were drafted into the US military. Isaac Mercer's conscription into the US military suggests some African American soldiers were not given a choice on whether or not to serve in the US military. In December 1951, Isaac Mercer received his draft notice in the mail.<sup>91</sup> On January 7, 1952, Mercer boarded a military bus and later was sent to Fort Sheridan for basic training.<sup>92</sup> He went on to serve as a corporal within an infantry unit within the Forty-Fifth Division of the US Army. Homer Franklin, a Korean War veteran who worked in a medical unit, also had been drafted. According to Franklin, "Young people of a certain age, once you reached 18 years of age, you were simply, quite simply, drafted into the military. You had no choice but to go into the military."<sup>93</sup> A. J. Nero was drafted but deferred enlistment for two years so he could finish college.<sup>94</sup> When Nero graduated in 1952, "they owned my tail, and then, soon as I graduated, they scooped me up. I went right on into the service."<sup>95</sup> Thus, certain private memories suggest some African Americans joined the military because they were called for duty. African Americans who were drafted had no choice but to serve in the military. If they refused to serve in the army, they risked going to jail.

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<sup>91</sup>Isaac Mercer, interviewed by Mark DePue. Personal Interview, Dixon, Illinois, December 29, 2010.

<sup>92</sup>Ibid.

<sup>93</sup>Homer Franklin, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Chicago, Illinois, November 28, 2014.

<sup>94</sup>A. J. Nero, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Chicago, Illinois, November 14, 2014.

<sup>95</sup>Ibid.

Just as African Americans were drafted, white soldiers were also drafted to serve during the Korean War. Lawrence Curtin's, Jim Stone's, Robert Berry's, and John Raschkes's oral history testimonies are linked because they all served in the US military. Lawrence Curtin was drafted on December 8, 1950.<sup>96</sup> Jim Stone was drafted on September 23, 1950.<sup>97</sup> Robert Berry was drafted less than a year later in May of 1951.<sup>98</sup> John Raschke was drafted in January of 1952.<sup>99</sup> Like many African American soldiers, many white soldiers were required to serve in Korea because they were drafted.

### **Conclusion**

Although private and public memories expose the motivations of some African Americans for joining the US military, private memories offer far greater context, more nuance, and additional insights. Unlike public memories, private memories provide perspective on how the socioeconomic conditions of some future African American soldiers affected their quality of life and drove them toward military service. Specifically, private memories of African American veterans reveal how poverty affected the quality of their education and expose the violence some endured while living in these impoverished communities. As I have shown, historiography overlooks the socioeconomic forces shaping life for African American men in the 1930s and 1940s.

In addition, private memories offer a more nuanced portrayal of how societal pressure encouraged some African Americans to enlist during the Korean War as compared to

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<sup>96</sup>Lawrence Curtin, interviewed by Mark DePue. Personal Interview, Springfield, Illinois, March 14, 2012.

<sup>97</sup>Jim Stone, interviewed by Mark DePue. Personal Interview, Springfield, Illinois, May 21, 2008.

<sup>98</sup>Robert Berry, interviewed by Mark DePue. Personal Interview, Springfield, Illinois, September 12, 2007.

<sup>99</sup>John Raschke, interviewed by Mark DePue. Personal Interview, Springfield, Illinois, January 25, 2010.

historiography's coverage of the topic. In particular, more history books' usage of oral history testimonies places a far greater emphasis on the family's influence on African American soldiers' decisions to enlist.<sup>100</sup> Moreover, private histories underscore how a variety of societal forces, such as family, friends, and encountering a military institution, encouraged some African American soldiers to enlist. While a correlation exists between public and private memories on the impact family members had on encouraging some African Americans to enlist in the US military, private memories reveal that it was, in fact, often a more complex set of factors that motivated African Americans to sign up for the Korean War.

Public memories offer a narrow view on how some African Americans used the US military to escape from people and institutions that were a threat to them. The majority of public memories address how the US military served as a means to escape from local law enforcement, but beyond this, they fail to explore the multitude of other forces facing young African Americans in the 1930s and 1940s. By contrast, the oral history testimonies that I conducted detail how the military offered sanctuary from violence, crime, and tumultuous family environments. Thus, private memories widen the sense of how the military was used by some African American soldiers as a safe haven from problems that African American young men faced within their communities and at home.

Private memories provide more details on themes that appear in public memories, as well as address topics historiography fails to cover entirely. Patriotism is not covered in public memories as a motivation for some African Americans to consider enlisting in the US military during the Korean War. Consequently, historiography's omission of patriotism as a factor in

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<sup>100</sup>Green, *Black Yanks in the Pacific*, 21.

encouraging African Americans to enlist reveals the reductionist nature of most historical narratives on the subject.

Finally, historiography ignores the emotional subtext of enlistment, an element widely discussed in private memories. The omission of emotions from the stories of African American soldiers gives the historical narrative a flat, one-dimensional quality. Private memories of African Americans, on the other hand, often highlight their emotions and provide a window into the role those emotions played in inspiring African Americans to enlist. Consequently, these oral history testimonies bring further complexity to our understanding of the motives of African Americans who joined the US military during the Korean War.

The reasons African American soldiers enlisted in the US military during the Korean War are as complex as the hundreds of thousands of African American soldiers who served during the war. While public memories highlight a few of the reasons African Americans joined the military, they fail to uncover important social and cultural forces that inspired some African Americans to sign up, as revealed in my interviews with Korean War veterans. On the other hand, private memories reveal events, people, and organizations that were powerful motivating factors behind African American men signing up for the US military during the war. Consequently, private memories complicate the narrative on why African American young men enlisted in the US military in the Korean War era.

The next chapter, entitled “Basic Training,” will draw on the work and findings of this chapter to explore how the US military prepared African American soldiers for war through physical and psychological conditioning and weapons training. Further, Chapter 2 will examine

the challenges African American soldiers faced as they were gradually integrated into the US armed forces.

## CHAPTER 2

### BASIC TRAINING EXPERIENCES

In reflecting on his basic training at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, in August of 1950, Curtis Morrow said, “You may be bigger than me, but, shit, you got to kick my ass, man. You got to kick it every day.”<sup>1</sup> Morrow needed such fearlessness and resolve to carry him through his tour of duty in Korea as a member of the all-Black Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment as well as the complex social workings of the American military from August 1950 to June 1954. Morrow’s ability to focus on his training in spite of the racism he endured is reflective of the challenges African American soldiers faced on army bases during the Korean War era. While some African Americans, in both public and private memories, indicate that racial issues affected their experiences during basic training, others deny race was an issue. President Harry S. Truman desegregated the military with Executive Order 9981, on July 26, 1948, but oral testimonies reveal that a web of complex and contradictory practices of segregation still lingered in the US armed forces throughout the duration of the Korean War.

This chapter is divided into four parts. First, I explore the social context surrounding the desegregation of the military in 1948 and analyze A. Philip Randolph’s and President Truman’s roles in ending segregation in the US military. Second, I examine the conventional narrative that Black soldiers were ill-equipped for military service by contrasting it with private memories of African American soldiers that highlight the way the US military prepared them for armed combat. Third, I employ private memories drawn from oral history testimonies to expand the

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<sup>1</sup>Curtis Morrow, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Chicago, Illinois, January 7, 2015.

historiography of the African American experience of military service during the Korean War. I examine the competing claims surrounding soldiers' treatment at the hands of their commanding officers as well as the caliber of their training. Finally, I trace the at times subtle undercurrent of racism present through all levels of the military during the late 1940s to 1953, the year the armistice was signed, ending the Korean War. In short, contrary to some historians that suggest African American soldiers were not well prepared, I demonstrate that in spite of racism African American soldiers received training that prepared them for war.

As this chapter will show, the historical narrative of the African American experience during the Korean War provides an incomplete picture of the basic training experience of African American soldiers. Public memories on this aspect of the wartime experience provide a top-down interpretation of the African American experience that pays too much attention to commanding officers of African American soldiers and marginalizes the soldiers themselves. Private memories, however, provide a deeper, more intimate depiction of the African American experience. Consequently, private memories of African American soldiers' training for combat in the Korean War offer insights into how they prepared, what challenges they faced, and how they addressed those problems while they prepared for war.

### **Civil Rights, Executive Order 9981, and Continued Racism in a Newly Desegregated Army**

The desegregation of the military grew out of achievements by activists such as A. Philip Randolph in civil society. Under Jim Crow, African Americans were forced to ride in the back of buses, attend separate schools, and live in separate communities from whites. In the civilian sphere, bold and courageous leadership addressed these inequities. Chief among these activists

was A. Philip Randolph, a civil rights leader from the 1930s and 1940s, who laid the foundation for the Civil Rights Movement that would take place a few decades later. Randolph organized the March on Washington in the early 1940s that sought to help African Americans secure employment within schools, the government, and the business community.<sup>2</sup> Above all, Randolph played an instrumental role in desegregating the military. Through his leadership, the African American community gained more freedom and secured more rights in both the civilian and the military spheres.<sup>3</sup>

Before campaigning against segregation in the US military, Randolph tested his methods for breaking down racial barriers in civil society. On August 25, 1937, Randolph helped the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters unionize. This achievement is striking given the power

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<sup>2</sup>Cornelius L. Bynum, *A. Philip Randolph and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 157.

<sup>3</sup>Ed. Andrew Kersten and Clarence Lang, *Reframing Randolph: Labor, Black Freedom, and the Legacies of A. Philip Randolph* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 89. Ruth Thompson-Miller, Joe R. Feagin, Leslie H. Picca, *Jim Crow's Legacy: The Lasting Impact of Segregation* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), 118. In the late nineteenth century, racism against African Americans became institutionalized through the creation of Jim Crow, a system that was created after the Supreme Court ruling on *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) that permitted the segregation of African Americans. *Reframing Randolph* argues that A. Philip Randolph sought to end Jim Crow through his civic activism. A combination of factors helped to shape Randolph's career in civil rights, including the stories of African American heroes such as Harriet Tubman, the racism he faced within the workforce at an early age, the lessons he learned through books such as *Souls of Black Folks*, and his religious faith. Taken together, these forces gave Randolph a philosophical framework that he would apply later in life. As Cornelius Bynum put it in *A. Philip Randolph and the Struggle for Civil Rights*, "this potent nexus of moral and religious opposition to black oppression had a profound impact on Randolph's evolving racial identity" (28). These influences in Randolph's life prepared him to become a leading figure in the fight for equal rights for African Americans. Randolph's racial consciousness was not the only force driving his civic activism. His class consciousness, developed while he was a student at City College of New York (CCNY), encouraged him to embrace elements of socialism. In college, "Randolph was learning about socialism in his courses and watching his classmates organize in support of workers' rights" (67). When Randolph left CCNY in 1914, "it marked the beginning of his final break with the exclusively racial worldview that shaped his childhood" (67). His later arrest for his participation at an antiwar rally in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1917 signaled a shift in his behavior. Randolph was acting upon his beliefs and was willing to go to jail for them. Finally, in 1918 Randolph joined the Socialist Party. Randolph viewed the Socialist Party "as African Americans' best political option" (69). For Randolph, the biggest problem facing African Americans was "their ability to 'sell their labor in the market effectively'" (69). His solution was simple: African Americans had to unionize, an "overhaul of the industrial capitalism" had to occur, and the Socialist Party had to emerge as a legitimate political entity (69). If these issues were addressed, Randolph believed, the state of the African American community would improve.

disparity between Pullman laborers and their employer. Whereas the Pullman Company was wealthy, well-connected, and ruthless, most of the laborers had a limited education and few economic resources to fall back upon. The company used a variety of tactics to undermine labor organizers. Scare tactics included planting spies within the Brotherhood to inform on union members and threatening to fire and suspend porters who joined the union.<sup>4</sup> The Pullman Company also relied heavily on the influence of “the black church, the black press, and the ‘big Negroes,’ as the chief instruments of propaganda against the union and its leadership.”<sup>5</sup> These measures ensured a significant number of Pullman porters were reluctant to join the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters union.

When Franklin Roosevelt took office in 1932, the fortunes of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters changed. President Roosevelt was elected in part because of strong support he received from organized labor.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, Roosevelt felt obliged to help organized labor by sponsoring legislation that would “strengthen the right of self-organization and the power of collective bargaining” of labor unions.<sup>7</sup> Roosevelt empowered organized labor by appointing Donald Richberg, a representative of the railroad unions, to a committee that drafted legislation for the national recovery program.<sup>8</sup> Richberg helped write sections of the national recovery program that gave employees the power to advocate for their interests by selecting

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Jervis Anderson, *A. Philip Randolph: A Biographical Portrait* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 216.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 217.

representatives of their own choosing, not their employers.<sup>9</sup> The inclusion of this section into the national recovery program gave Randolph greater agency in his fight to create a union that represented the interests of African American Pullman Car Porters.

After prevailing in getting the Pullman Company to acknowledge the Brotherhood of Pullman Car Porters and to accept terms that would enhance the working conditions of African Americans, Randolph set his sights on the effects of Jim Crow in the US military. Before Randolph's efforts to secure parity within the US military, the US military was essentially two armies—one black, one white. African Americans and whites trained separately and fought in separate units. Randolph began his assault on military segregation by forming the March on Washington organization. In order to draw attention to the “twin goals of desegregation of the military and the opening to blacks of jobs in defense industries,”<sup>10</sup> Randolph sought to lead a march of thousands of African Americans in Washington. He declared, “Let them [African Americans] come in automobiles, buses, trains, trucks, and on foot. Let them come though the winds blow and the rains beat against them.”<sup>11</sup> Worried that Randolph's march would anger whites in the nation's capital, the president sought to persuade Randolph not to go through with the March on Washington.

President Roosevelt tried to stop the March on Washington in two ways. First, he summoned Randolph to the White House to discuss the activist's demands. At the meeting, according to Paula Pfeffer, Roosevelt enticed Randolph “to stop the march in return for his

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Paula Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph, Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 49.

<sup>11</sup>David Welky, *Marching Across the Color Line: A. Philip Randolph and Civil Rights in the World War II Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 60.

personal promise for better treatment of blacks.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, President Roosevelt had Eleanor Roosevelt write a letter to Randolph explaining why the March on Washington was a bad idea. In the letter to Randolph, Eleanor Roosevelt wrote, “I feel very strongly that your group is making a very grave mistake at the present time to allow this march to take place.”<sup>13</sup> Later, she stated, “I am afraid it will set back the progress which is being made, in the Army at least, towards better opportunities and less segregation.”<sup>14</sup> Randolph persisted, however, and “refused to call off the march without a tangible concession.”<sup>15</sup> Randolph wanted concrete policies that would help further the cause of desegregation.

The civil rights leader’s strategy was revolutionary because it introduced new rules to the political bargaining process.<sup>16</sup> As Pfeffer notes, “Blacks were not supposed to make demands; they had always begged in the past. The white decision makers, accustomed to dealing with Blacks as clients, did not know how to react to pressure tactics.”<sup>17</sup> Randolph’s strategy was unique because it compelled white leaders to meet his expectations. As Roosevelt had anticipated, the civil rights activist’s move to bring thousands of African Americans to Washington worried some whites. According to Pfeffer, “The idea that masses of blacks would be brought into one of the most segregated cities in the country shocked and frightened the white

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<sup>12</sup>Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph, Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement*, 49.

<sup>13</sup>Welky, *Marching Across the Color Line: A. Philip Randolph and Civil Rights in the World War II Era*, 66.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph, Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement*, 49.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 48.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

community.”<sup>18</sup> President Roosevelt had no choice. Randolph’s plan forced Roosevelt to recognize and act upon the demands associated with the March on Washington.

As a direct result of Randolph’s fierce negotiating tactics, Roosevelt was forced to take action. President Roosevelt’s administration enacted Executive Order No. 8802, which prohibited employment discrimination in the defense industries and within the civilian agencies of the US federal government.<sup>19</sup> To ensure Executive Order 8802 was followed, President Roosevelt created the wartime Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC), which became the paradigm for all federal, state, and local civil rights agencies.<sup>20</sup> The FEPC improved the economic circumstances of some African Americans. Randolph’s risky strategy paid off. Indeed, Randolph demonstrated to the African American community that “the threat of direct mass action was the correct tactic to use on an executive sensitive to public opinion.”<sup>21</sup> Buoyed by this realization, Randolph continued to push for more reforms that would end segregation in the US military.

President Roosevelt addressed some of Randolph’s demands, but it would fall to the Truman administration to end segregation in the US armed forces. In *A. Philip Randolph, Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement*, Paula Pfeffer explores how Randolph spearheaded civil rights movements that helped African Americans secure social and political equality within the

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid. Randolph believed a campaign financed and organized by blacks would give the black community confidence. As Randolph is quoted as saying in *A. Philip Randolph, Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement*, “The essential value of an all-Negro movement such as the March on Washington is that it helps to create faith by Negroes in Negroes. It develops a sense of self-reliance with Negroes depending on Negroes in vital matters” (56-57).

<sup>19</sup>Andrew Kersten and Clarence Lang, eds., *Reframing Randolph: Labor, Black Freedom, and Legacies of A. Philip Randolph* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 7.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph, Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement*, 89.

United States. Pfeffer notes, “In 1947 and 1948, Randolph launched a two-pronged attack to achieve his goal.”<sup>22</sup> First, he formed a group called the Committee Against Jim Crow in Military Service and Training. The committee used legal methods to effect change within the US military.<sup>23</sup> In addition, he founded the League for Non-Violent Civil Disobedience Against Military Segregation. The league took the approach of civil disobedience and “urged youths to resist induction into a segregated military establishment.”<sup>24</sup> These two organizations put pressure on President Truman and his administration to address racial discrimination against African Americans in the US military.

Desegregating the military proved complicated and played a role in the presidential election of 1948. President Truman, politicians, and military leaders knew that continued segregation might encourage mass resistance against the armed forces. Yet they were worried that the end of segregation would invite large demonstrations from whites, especially in the South.<sup>25</sup> Ultimately, politics drove Truman’s decision to end segregation in the military.

During the election of 1948, the Democratic Party broke into several factions. As Pfeffer argues, “A Democratic party splintered by Dixiecrat disaffections on the right and Henry Wallace’s Progressive revolt on the left had relieved [Truman] of the need to cater to the southern bloc.”<sup>26</sup> In addition, Randolph pushed for military desegregation, and the FEPC pressured President Truman during the presidential election of 1948.<sup>27</sup> As a result of this split

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 133-134.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 140.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 146.

and the influence of Randolph and the FEPC, Truman shifted his attention to the African American community because without their votes, he could not win the election.

To secure the Black vote, Truman gave in to Randolph's demands for integrating the US military. On July 26, 1948, President Truman issued Executive Order 9981, which stated, "There shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion or national origin."<sup>28</sup> Truman's commitment to helping African Americans paved the way for the integration of African Americans into the armed forces.

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>Harry Truman, Executive Order 9981, The White House July 26, 1948. Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph, Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement*, 146-147. Truman's commitment to approach civil rights through the courts was monumental. By nominating judges who were empathetic to his cause and assigning an assistant solicitor general to aggressively fight for the rights of blacks in the courts, Truman left a mark on the legal system that affects the United States today. Robert Shogan, *Harry Truman and the Struggle for Racial Justice* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2013). According to Robert Shogan in *Harry Truman and the Struggle for Racial Justice*, "He was the first to make the struggle for racial justice part of the national agenda, to define bias against Americans of color as an evil that violated the Constitution" (180). Truman's push for civil rights was revolutionary. As a result of his commitment to civil rights, he created a political and legal precedent in support of civil rights. Of the many cases that Truman's Justice Department worked on, their work on "elementary school segregation" had the most lasting effect on American society. Assistant to Solicitor General Philip Elman, representative of the US government, set out to attack "separate but equal" within the schools by first undermining the legitimacy of that doctrine (176). Elman stated, "'Separate but equal' is a contradiction in terms" (176). Later, he suggested that "there can be no enjoyment of equality for children who know that because of their color the law sets them apart from and requires them to attend separate schools especially established for members of their race" (176-177). Through this logic, Elman argued that separate but equal did not create equality. Instead, separate but equal established a two-tiered system in which whites were given a higher quality of education, while blacks were provided an inferior, low-quality education.

Because segregation within schooling was a heated topic, Elman had to calibrate his argument in a way that would not create social unrest. Elman gave the courts a way to end racial segregation "without inviting massive disobedience" (176-177). As Elman put it, "The government would suggest that in shaping the relief the Court should take into account the need, not only for prompt vindication of the constitutional rights violated but also for orderly and reasonable solution of the vexing problems which may arise in eliminating such segregation" (176-177). Furthermore, Elman stated, "The public interest plainly would be served by avoidance of needless dislocation and confusion in the administration of the school system" (176-177). Elman was ingenious. He created a way to end racial segregation without causing a groundswell of resentment that could potentially have turned violent.

Truman's decision to allow Elman to take on separate but equal was critical to the Civil Rights Movement. Separate but equal was one of the key concepts that upheld Jim Crow, and, as such, dismantling it was essential to ending Jim Crow. Elman's victory in the courts set a legal precedent that changed the United States. According to Shogan, "Truman's decision to approve the justice department amicus brief was the crowning triumph in the department's effort to use the courts to make the country live up to its constitution" (176-177). Truman's decision to have Elman take on separate but equal through the courts was instrumental in helping to dismantle Jim Crow.

Despite Truman's commitment to help advance civil rights, integration was implemented irregularly within the US military during the Korean War era.<sup>29</sup> The military was integrated theoretically in 1948. Nevertheless, certain segments of the armed forces were still segregated. For example, in the late 1940s and early 1950s the barracks and training facilities of some fighting units, such as the Twenty-Fourth Infantry, were segregated. In addition to the remnants of segregation, racism remained prevalent in many facets of the US armed forces in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

Evidence of the lingering effects of segregation and racism in the military emerge in books such as Gerald Astor's *The Right to Fight*. For example, Astor describes how racial tensions emerged at local clubs where American soldiers, both Black and White, socialized. In particular, Astor describes how African Americans and Whites got into frequent fights at clubs while they were stationed in Japan.<sup>30</sup> According to Astor, "The 1st Cavalry wouldn't let them [blacks] in some of the clubs and fights broke out. There were two MP [military police] companies in Tokyo, one black and one white. When a fight started, the black MPs would wait until the white MPs arrived before they broke it up."<sup>31</sup> This potential for conflict posed a

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>Gerald Astor, *The Right to Fight: A History of African Americans in the Military* (Novato: Presidio, 1998), 346-347.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid. Astor also suggests that nightclubs in Kobe, Japan, were segregated. Alan Osur, *Blacks in the Army Air Force During World War II* (Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1975), 112. World War II historiography reveals the hostilities between African American and white soldiers on US Army bases. Despite many of the African American soldiers having administrative experience and having college degrees, they were often overlooked for promotions. As a result, Osur asserts that some African Americans were resentful. Korean War historiography does not address the process of promotions during training programs at US Army bases and its impact on race relations. Nina Mjagkij, *Loyalty in the Time of Trial* (Boulder: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2011), 90. During World War I many military officials were concerned that African American soldiers who left the army base to go to town would create racial conflicts, get drunk, and contract venereal diseases from prostitutes. From their point of view, this would undermine military effectiveness. White military officials from the Korean War

challenge for African American soldiers with positions of responsibility, such as MPs. While black MPs were required to keep order, they also wanted to give African American soldiers a chance to defend themselves against white soldiers. Their response—waiting until a white MP arrived before breaking up the fight—reflects this sentiment. Moreover, confrontations between black and white soldiers exemplify the racial tensions that simmered on American bases, both in the United States and abroad.

The challenges of integration extended far beyond the interpersonal dynamics of a newly desegregated army. As we will see in the next section, the effects of segregation and racism affected the military's training of African American troops, their wartime strategies, and the histories told about African American servicemen.

### **Training and Evaluating African American Troops**

Historiography inaccurately portrays the African American experience during the Korean War. In particular, the historical narrative often uses a top-down perspective on the war. Such a viewpoint leaves out details of the African American experience during basic training. Additionally, historiography makes presumptions about the training of African American soldiers that frames them negatively and leads readers to conclude that African American soldiers were ill-equipped to fight in Korea.

The historical narrative of African American soldiers who served during the Korean War era inaccurately represents their contributions to the war. Some books, for example, provide the perspective of military commanders while ignoring the experiences of African American soldiers

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voiced similar concerns (90). William Bowers, William Hammond, and George MacGarrigle, *Black Soldier, White Army: The 24th Infantry Regiment in Korea* (Washington, C: Center of Military History, 1997), 52. William Bowers, William Hammond, and George MacGarrigle suggest that some military officials believed the spread of venereal diseases was a serious problem for African American soldiers at US Army bases.

who served. In turn, this approach fails to address the racism African American soldiers faced as they prepared for war. Additionally, historiography fails to address the emotions African American soldiers experienced during the war. Although historiography may highlight how African American soldiers prepared for war, these narratives leave out the emotional and psychological impact of segregated basic training on African American soldiers before they went to Korea to fight.

Historiography indicates that at the outset of the Korean War, some US military decision-makers were hesitant to use African American soldiers in combat because many were poorly educated.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, even before they deployed to Korea, African American soldiers had to prove their worth to the US armed forces and show that they were capable soldiers. According to Bernard Nalty's *Strength for the Fight*, "The Far East Command directed that blacks who had not completed the fifth grade or had scored badly on the aptitude tests should undergo special schooling."<sup>33</sup> As a result, some African Americans were required to undergo more training to ensure they were prepared for war in Korea.

Although some scholars, such as Nalty, describe how African Americans received training to compensate for perceived shortcomings, others, including William Bowers, William Hammond, and George MacGarrigle, declare that African Americans from the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment were destined for failure without citing evidence to back up their claim. In *Black Soldier, White Army*, Bowers, Hammond, and MacGarrigle fail to use direct quotes from oral history testimonies of African American soldiers. Focusing on the experiences of the

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<sup>32</sup>Bernard Nalty, *Strength for the Fight: Black Americans in the Military* (New York: Free Press, 1986), 224-225.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment would nuance Bowers, Hammond, and MacGarrigle's claims about the infantry regiment. For example, William Bowers, William Hammond, and George MacGarrigle claim the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment was plagued by "drugs, venereal disease, black-market trading, and all the institutional debilities brought on by the post-World War II drawdown of the Army."<sup>34</sup> While these factors may have affected the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment, the authors failed to consult with any member of the infantry, undermining the validity of these claims. Without oral testimonials from members of the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment, it is impossible to corroborate the claim that drugs, sexually transmitted diseases, and black-market trading significantly impacted the preparedness of the infantry.

Another shortcoming of the dominant historiography of African Americans in the Korean War is its tendency to frame the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment's participation in sports and musical events as distractions from their training. For example, Bowers, Hammond, and MacGarrigle support their claim that African American soldiers from the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment were ill-prepared to fight in Korea by suggesting the soldiers spent too much time playing sports at the expense of their training for war.<sup>35</sup> As an example of seemingly misplaced priorities, the book cites the numerous sports awards the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment won—from Master Sergeant Howard "Big Boy" Williams's All-Army Boxing title to the unit's football and basketball teams' divisional championships.<sup>36</sup> In addition to sports, the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment had a high-quality band. According to Bowers, Hammond, and MacGarrigle, "The 24th's band added to the men's self-esteem by winning renown throughout

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<sup>34</sup>William Bowers, William Hammond, and George MacGarrigle, *Black Soldier, White Army: The 24th Infantry Regiment in Korea* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1997), 65.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 64.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 51.

the Far East Command, where it was on constant call to perform at special functions.”<sup>37</sup> Bowers, Hammond, and MacGarrigle use these examples of excellence in music and sports to imply that the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment wasted valuable time that should have been used for combat training.

The assertion that the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment spent too much time entertaining themselves and failed to prepare for war is problematic for several reasons. As with other units, the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment’s success at playing various sports helped the soldiers bond. Ultimately, this made the regiment more cohesive. Additionally, the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment’s participation in sports prepared them to fight more strenuously. Consequently, Bowers, Hammond, and MacGarrigle’s framing of the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment’s devotion to sports and music as a misuse of time fails to account for the benefits of their participation in these activities. By comparison, there were many white units who excelled at sports and music and were still considered fierce fighting forces. The same critiques are not applied to similarly successful white units, revealing Bowers, Hammond, and MacGarrigle’s bias.

Scholars such as Bowers, Hammond, and MacGarrigle paint a biased picture of the quality of training African American soldiers received. For example, Bowers, Hammond, and MacGarrigle use primary sources such as Schnabel’s Policy and Direction and First Officer of the Chief of Army Field Forces Observer Team to Far East Command to suggest that the Twenty-Fourth Infantry was not ready for war. As Bowers, Hammond, and MacGarrigle put it, the Twenty-Fourth Infantry did not master “basic combat techniques as scouting, patrolling,

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<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

night operations, and the selection and preparation of firing positions.”<sup>38</sup> Others, including Bernard Nalty, use primary sources, such as Lieutenant General Stephen Chamberlain’s memorandum Report of Board of Officers on the Utilization of Negro Manpower in the Army, to suggest prevailing racism hindered integration within the US military. According to Lieutenant General Stephen Chamberlain’s report, African Americans were “well below 10% of the leadership and skills of the nation as a whole.”<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, the report states that it was up to the “the white man” to “supply the deficiency.”<sup>40</sup> Nalty uses Chamberlain’s memorandum to suggest why the US military was slow to integrate African American soldiers with white soldiers. Nalty argues the US military did not have the time or desire to integrate African American soldiers with white soldiers during basic training or during the Korean War.<sup>41</sup> These top-down primary sources fail to provide a complex perspective on the training experiences of African American soldiers. In the next section I show how private memories provide an intimate account of the African American experience during the Korean War often overlooked in scholarship.

### **Private Memories Serve to Expand the Narrative of African American Service**

As we have seen, top-down histories of African American servicemen in the Korean War present their experience in a limited and frequently negative light. The full picture is more

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 65.

<sup>39</sup>Memorandum, Lieutenant General Stephen J. Chamberlain, through the Chief of Staff, to the Secretary of the Army, February 9, 1950, subject: Report of Board of Officers on the Utilization of Negro Manpower in the Army.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>Bernard Nalty, *Strength for the Fight: A History of Black Americans in the Military* (New York: The Free Press, 1986), 256.

complex, however. In my work gathering oral history testimonies from African American veterans, I discovered that they were well-trained in basic military skills, weapons, medicine, and engineering as well as prepared to mentally survive their deployment. One way to ensure the validity of the histories of the African American military experience during the Korean War is to listen to the voices of the men who were there.

Oral history testimonies suggest basic training taught African American soldiers the skills that helped them fight in Korea. At the most basic level, the training African American soldiers received got them into shape physically. Curtis Morrow, a member of the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment, stated that his basic training experience was rigorous. According to Morrow, basic training was tough because it “was all about physical education.”<sup>42</sup> As Morrow put it, “You got to exercise and running and jumping and climbing and push-ups and then more push-ups.”<sup>43</sup> Morrow further stated that soldiers had to “run maybe five miles, [do] dismounted drills, marching back and forth. You run, jog, maybe five miles or whatever, but mostly it was drilling, doing dismounted drills, which get to you, tiring and boring.”<sup>44</sup> Basic training forced Morrow to get into shape so that he could withstand the physical demands of war in Korea. James Jenkins had a similar experience in basic training. According to Jenkins, “You had physical training. We had what they call PT every day, exercise, and strengthen your upper body, your lower body, and then marching. Every Wednesday, you went on a long march, 40, 45 miles.”<sup>45</sup> Although *Black Soldier, White Army* suggests African American soldiers failed to prepare for war, oral history

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<sup>42</sup>Curtis Morrow, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Chicago, Illinois, January 7, 2015.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

<sup>45</sup>Jesse Jenkins, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Crown Point, Indiana, February 18, 2015.

testimonies suggest that their basic training was as regimented and physically demanding as that expected of white soldiers.

Oral history testimonies of white soldiers confirm that the military training white soldiers received was similar to what African American soldiers received. When white soldiers got to base, they were required to go through extensive physical training. According to Stanley Eugene Allen, a white soldier who served in the US military during the Korean War, his boot camp experience was exhausting. As he put it, “You go through everything, your marching, your rifle, machine gun, a lot of marching, a lot of double-timing to build up your stamina and all that, exercises.”<sup>46</sup> According to John Edwin Battershell, boot camp training was “intended to get you into shape.”<sup>47</sup> The training white soldiers received not only hardened their bodies but also strengthened them mentally. As John Battershell put it, basic training prepared him “mentally as well as physically” for battle.<sup>48</sup> Allen’s and Battershell’s oral history testimonies align with African American Korean War soldiers’ experiences of boot camp in that both testimonies reveal the US military required soldiers to go through extensive physical training during boot camp.

While most soldiers received high-quality training during basic training, a few oral history testimonies of white soldiers reveal that some received inadequate training. For example, Jack Clark, a Korean War veteran, recalls that his company was forced to borrow M1 rifles from the military police because there were not enough rifles to train with on base.<sup>49</sup> Of the six

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<sup>46</sup>Stanley Eugene Allen, interviewed by Glenn Mitchell. Personal Interview, January 8, 2004.

<sup>47</sup>John Edwin Battershell, interviewed by Barbara A. Belt. Personal Interview, Castle Rock, Colorado, August 7, 2008.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

<sup>49</sup>Jack Clark, interviewed by Andrew Agee. Personal Interview.

carbines (a light automatic rifle) given to his company to train with, half of them did not work.<sup>50</sup> Additionally, his company never had an opportunity to fire a machine gun. Clark further recalls that “everything else they had to scrap or borrow from somebody.”<sup>51</sup> So, because a few white soldiers were not given the chance to practice with a wide range of different weapons, the training African American soldiers received was not always inferior to their white counterparts’ training. In some cases, their training was superior to the training some white soldiers received.

At the beginning of basic training, African American and white soldiers were required to take a variety of different tests. According to John Battershell, a white soldier who served during the Korean War, he took the “general intelligence, they call it GCT,” and “a mechanical aptitude test and a clerical aptitude test.”<sup>52</sup> Based upon these tests, the US military either assigned soldiers to specialized schools or gave them a choice on what school to attend. For example, after John Baumgartner completed basic training, he “wound up going to clerk’s school.”<sup>53</sup> The US military administered these tests as a means to figure out how best to utilize them.

Like White soldiers, African Americans received Advanced Individual Training when they completed basic training. African American soldiers were often given a chance to request schools that would teach them specific skills, including language, weapons, mechanical work, engineering, and medicine. Ultimately, soldiers would use these skills for their job in the army.<sup>54</sup> James Lacy, for example, traveled to Gifu, Japan, to train in weapons. According to Lacy, “I

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<sup>50</sup>Ibid.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

<sup>52</sup>John Edwin Battershell, interviewed by Barbara A. Belt. Personal Interview.

<sup>53</sup>John Churchill Baumgartner, interviewed by Kevin Parrish. Personal Interview.

<sup>54</sup>James Lacy, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Chicago, Illinois, January 20, 2015.

wanted to go, and the next school to open up was rifle repair, called Arm Artillery, and I wanted to know what made my rifle operate and everything, and put my name up.”<sup>55</sup> While Lacy was at rifle school, he learned how to care for his weapon. As Lacy put it, “I went on to school, finished school, and in the school we learned to take the weapons down and put them back together blindfolded. No light at all. It worked, because when we’re in the war, I was called [at] three o’clock in the morning, two or three in the morning; the machine gun had jammed up.”<sup>56</sup> While historiography suggests African American soldiers did not receive adequate training, oral testimonies indicate African Americans were offered specialized training at army bases that allowed them to perform in the field.

For Curtis Morrow, also a member of the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment, weapons training was vital to his survival on the battlefield. Morrow was required to go to a class for weapons training.<sup>57</sup> He was also provided lessons on tactics to be employed in combat.<sup>58</sup> As Morrow put it, the rifle the army trained him with “was an eight cartridge. I forget all of the specifications of it now, but it was a nine-pound. It would, if you put the bayonet on, probably come up to my chest. They teach you about the accuracy of it and so forth.”<sup>59</sup> After Morrow was taught the basics about rifles, he and his fellow soldiers were taken to the rifle range to train by firing at targets.<sup>60</sup> At the rifle range, “They give you live ammunition, and you use targets, oh

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid.

<sup>57</sup>Curtis Morrow, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Chicago, Illinois, January 7, 2015.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid.

man, for at least two weeks, just firing at bull's-eye targets.”<sup>61</sup> Through this training, Morrow became skilled at firing a rifle. Eventually, he qualified as a sharpshooter.

In addition to historiography failing to address the extensive training African American soldiers obtained, the historical narrative also neglects to conduct a comparative analysis between the training African American soldiers and white soldiers received. Unlike historiography, oral history testimonies reveal that white soldiers, like African American soldiers, got specialized training during basic training. Benton Bastian, a white Korean War veteran, stated, “We learned how to march. We had to fire all these various different weapons. We learned the use of the bayonet, of course.”<sup>62</sup> Other white soldiers got more training in weapons because they were a part of a heavy weapons company. Robert Barry, for instance, was “trained in all the arts of military hardware, rifles, pistols, machine guns, did a lot of marching, had mortars, heavy mortars, light mortars, bazookas, all kinds of weaponry.”<sup>63</sup> Oral history accounts indicate the specialized training white soldiers received was similar to that of African American soldiers. Consequently, oral history testimonies fill a gap in historiography that overlooks the caliber of training African American soldiers received juxtaposed to white soldiers.

Not only do oral history testimonies highlight the similarities of weapons training African American and white soldiers received, private memories also reveal a variety of other skills African American soldiers were trained for during basic training. Some were trained to save lives by working in medical units. Men such as Homer Franklin, who served in the Korean War in a

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<sup>61</sup>Ibid.

<sup>62</sup>Benton Edward Bastian, interviewed by Deborah Barrett. Personal Interview, January 23, 2011.

<sup>63</sup>Robert Barry, interviewed by Nick Miller. Personal Interview, May 26, 2002.

unit stationed away from the front lines, provided medical care for soldiers. As Franklin put it, “Most of my skills during basic training were having to do with caring for people who were sick and wounded. So, it was ... types of first aid and emergency care services that we provide. How to care for a broken limb, an open wound—things of that sort.”<sup>64</sup> Franklin contributed to the war effort by helping the wounded and sick recover from their injuries and illnesses. In this case, one oral history testimony reveals that some African American soldiers played a vital role in the war effort by aiding soldiers who were in need of medical attention.

Another element of the African American experience of war overlooked by dominant historiography includes those soldiers trained to build bridges and access water below the earth’s surface. Eugene Brazier, a soldier who served in the US military in Europe during the Korean War era, used his training to build bridges that withstood large truck convoys bringing supplies to troops. According to Brazier, “The main job I learned in Europe was how to build a bridge so that a 10-ton truck can cross fully loaded.”<sup>65</sup> Additionally, Brazier was trained in extracting water from the ground. As he put it, “One of the things I really enjoyed was ... drink, getting clear drinking water.”<sup>66</sup> Brazier would dig a hole, put a stick of dynamite in it, and light its fuse. He would repeat this cycle until water came to the surface. Brazier’s noncombat work was crucial for keeping other troops supplied and in the field.

While the dominant historiography claims African American soldiers did not receive adequate training, private memories reveal African American soldiers did get quality training that transformed them into mentally tough, competent soldiers. As with White soldiers, the

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<sup>64</sup>Homer Franklin, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Chicago, Illinois, November 28, 2014.

<sup>65</sup>Eugene Brazier, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Chicago, Illinois, January 5, 2015.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid.

training African American soldiers received changed them both physically and mentally. After surviving boot camp, soldiers became more resilient. As Curtis Morrow said, “They are making you tough because they’re going to make you prove that you’re worthy of being there. That’s the philosophy, I guess, or psychology behind the whole thing.”<sup>67</sup> This mental toughness that was bred into soldiers at basic training gave them an edge when they went into combat zones. As Curtis Morrow put it, “Hell, I’m going to do it or die trying.”<sup>68</sup> Morrow’s scrappy attitude helped to build his resilience. He said, “People can say things or try to do things to try to discourage you, but F them. [Laughs] I’m cleaning it up, right?”<sup>69</sup> This attitude to never give up kept Morrow alive when he went to war. Hence, basic training gave African American soldiers a fearless mentality that helped them fight against North Korean and Chinese soldiers.

The historical narrative omits the racism African American soldiers encountered during basic training, overlooks the struggles they endured as they prepared for war, and fails to examine the self-assured mentality the US military bred into its soldiers—African American and white alike. Unlike historiography, private memories highlight the undercurrent of racism African American soldiers experienced during basic training. Simmering racial tensions posed a serious challenge to African American soldiers as they prepared to go to war. Racist treatment undermined the morale of some African Americans. African American soldiers had to confront racism from some white soldiers who perceived them as competitors. Racial tensions between African American and white soldiers at times turned violent. These racial matters that African

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<sup>67</sup>Curtis Morrow, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Chicago, Illinois, January 7, 2015.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid.

American soldiers faced highlight the various ways in which racism was interwoven into the experiences of African American soldiers. The following section will explore the presence of bigotry as experienced by African American soldiers during basic training.

### **Racism as an Undercurrent**

Private memories of African American soldiers offer a nuanced depiction of their experiences during the Korean War. Tellingly, none of the oral history testimonies I captured described inspections during basic training. In fact, African Americans' oral history testimonies suggest they were excluded from inspections during basic training. This lack of attention to the quality of the training indicates some African American soldiers were subjected to a different basic training experience than white soldiers were. By contrast, some white soldiers recalled regular inspections. Benton Edward Bastian, a white soldier who served in the Korean War, recalled once he and his comrades came back from training at noon: "They'd say take everything outside and scrub the floors. We'd have to scrub the floors and eat within that hour or period that we had."<sup>70</sup> If they failed to finish scrubbing the floor within an hour, they were prohibited from doing certain things.<sup>71</sup> Bastian's experiences reveal subtle differences between the requirements for African American and white soldiers during basic training.

A consistent omission within historiography is the discussion of African American soldiers' experiences of racism within the military during the Korean War. Indeed, historiography's oversight of racism leaves out an important strand of the narrative on the African American experience. In spite of efforts made by the government to bring racial unity in the armed forces, and despite historiography's relative silence on this issue, oral history

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<sup>70</sup>Benton Edward Bastian, interviewed by Deborah Barrett. Personal Interview, January 23, 2011.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid.

testimonies indicate racism existed on army bases during the Korean War. One explanation for the lack of scholarship on racism as experienced by African American servicemen is the complex source of racist attitudes and behaviors.

Some oral history testimonies suggest racist sentiments were more prevalent among whites from certain regions in the United States. James Lacy, a member of the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment, revealed that racist sentiments toward African American soldiers came largely from white soldiers from the South. According to Lacy, “Some of the guys, the officers, were like, they were from down South. They were kind of rough with the colored soldiers.”<sup>72</sup> Lacy observed that southern soldiers disrespected African American soldiers. By contrast, he witnessed white soldiers from New York and New Jersey put pressure on southern whites to treat African American soldiers with respect. As Lacy said, “See, they kept them in line. They kept them in line.”<sup>73</sup> Lacy’s remarks suggest southern and northern soldiers diverged on how African American soldiers should be treated. On the one hand, some southern soldiers wanted to ensure African American soldiers remained in a subservient position within the US military. Some northern soldiers, on the other hand, lobbied for African American soldiers to be treated with respect and dignity. In the end, Lacy suggests northern soldiers protected African American soldiers from discriminatory practices waged against them by southern soldiers.

Lacy’s experience notwithstanding, a white soldier willing to intervene on behalf of African American soldiers remained a relative rarity. In some cases African American soldiers were forced to defend themselves against racist white soldiers. William Love, a Korean War veteran, experienced racism while he was at a US base. After Love took an aptitude test, he

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<sup>72</sup>James Lacy, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Chicago, Illinois, January 20, 2015.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid.

qualified to do twelve or thirteen jobs in the US military.<sup>74</sup> Love elected to be a coordinator/dispatcher of army trucks. During his training, Love was obligated to drive with a White man in his vehicle. While he was driving the truck, Love reported his partner physically assaulted him. As Love and his partner drove the truck during training, his partner would slap him, and Love would slap him back.<sup>75</sup> Later, Love suggested that when he was away from the man, “He’d be looking for where I [was].”<sup>76</sup> Love’s oral history testimony implied that this White man with whom he drove picked on him because he was Black. The physical confrontations that occurred between them reflect the racial hostility that existed during the Korean War.

Private memories further reveal how some African American soldiers rationalized the racism they encountered at US Army bases during the Korean War era, a point historiography fails to address. Before Curtis Morrow described the racism he received during basic training, he stated, “Most of the guys you got to deal with, they weren’t that way.”<sup>77</sup> Morrow indicated the majority of the white soldiers he knew treated him fairly and with respect. In cases where he did encounter racism during basic training, Morrow stated, “People don’t like you because you’re black. You ask them why, they couldn’t tell you.”<sup>78</sup> Morrow added, “There’s always a few assholes just everywhere you go.”<sup>79</sup> By framing the prejudice he experienced in the military as

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<sup>74</sup>William Love, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Chicago, Illinois, October 29, 2014.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid.

<sup>77</sup>Curtis Morrow, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Chicago, Illinois, January 7, 2015.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid.

part of a larger trend within American society, Morrow rationalized how the racism was an experience he had to manage to complete basic training successfully.

In addition to Morrow's rationalization that the racism he faced was a part of life, Morrow also reframed the racism he experienced during basic training as an incentive to get stronger. As Morrow put it, "I had to deal with it. Actually, on base, it was great. It was black hate. I ate it up, man. I liked it."<sup>80</sup> In other words, Morrow used the racism he experienced during basic training to make him more resilient. Morrow's statement suggests he endured a significant amount of racism during his basic training experience. Nevertheless, he refused to let the racism he encountered stop him from training to be the best soldier he could be. Morrow used the racism he experienced as motivation to prepare for war. This ability to transform a negative experience into an inspiration for self-improvement reveals Morrow's mental fortitude. Hence, for some African American soldiers, training hard to become a competent soldier became a form of redemption against the racism they experienced during basic training.

Morrow's response to the racism he experienced reminds scholars today to take a nuanced approach to interpreting the African American experience during the Korean War. While Morrow did experience racism from other white soldiers, he suggests racist officers were the exception rather than the rule. According to Morrow, "I don't recall getting any racism from the officers, because my officer, he was actually from the North. He was a straight dude."<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup>Ibid. Michael Lanning, *The African American Soldier from Crispus Attucks to Colin Powell* (New Jersey: Birch Lane Press, 1997), 233-234. Thurgood Marshall, a prominent African American civil rights attorney, traveled to Korea in 1951 to investigate the court martial hearings of thirty-two African American soldiers. Roughly half of the men were sentenced to either life in prison or death, while the other half were sentenced to ten to fifty years in prison. Through his investigation, Marshall discovered that several of the proceedings had lasted less than an hour. Additionally, Marshall later learned that one soldier charged with being AWOL was, in fact, in the hospital. Furthermore, four other soldiers were accused of cowardice even though they were working mess duty.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid.

Morrow's account suggests he believed that racist sentiments appeared unevenly across the US military. One explanation for why white enlisted men possibly harbored more racism is because they viewed African American soldiers as a potential threat. By contrast, African American soldiers were nearly universally of a different rank and authority than white officers and therefore were unavailable as competitors. Finally, empathy is often, but not always, a quality of education. That said, most White officers were better educated than White enlisted soldiers and, consequently, may have viewed African American soldiers through an empathic lens. Clearly, rank and region played a defining role in whether or not white soldiers were overtly racist.

While the racism that African American soldiers faced was dependent upon multiple variables, the nuances of racism that some African American soldiers experienced is only highlighted in some oral history testimonies. In fact, some African American soldiers' memories reveal they did not experience overt forms of racism, at least from their superior officers. James Lacy indicated that his white superior officers "had gotten away from" calling African Americans names.<sup>82</sup> Morrow's testimony reveals most of the racism he experienced was from his fellow enlisted men, not officers.<sup>83</sup> Roy Dell Johnson, the recipient of several Purple Hearts during the Korean War, provided oral history testimony supporting this observation. As Johnson said, "Our officers was fairly fair, you know."<sup>84</sup> Thus, private memories reveal a range of sentiments on racism experienced by African American soldiers. At one end of the spectrum, some African American soldiers experienced racism that manifested itself in physical

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<sup>82</sup>James Lacy, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Chicago, Illinois, January 20, 2015.

<sup>83</sup>Curtis Morrow, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Chicago, Illinois, January 7, 2015.

<sup>84</sup>Roy Dell Johnson, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Arlington, Texas, March 2, 2015.

confrontations. At the other end of the spectrum, some soldiers said racism was hardly a factor at all. Hence, oral history testimonies reveal that the racism African American soldiers were subjected to during basic training was easy to define but hard to quantify.

### **Conclusion**

While historiography covers a number of aspects of the African American experience during basic training, it leaves out significant details, events, and experiences. Most obviously, historiography portrays African American soldiers as unprepared for the Korean War. Through this line of reasoning, the lack of preparation African American soldiers received during basic training foreshadowed the problems they encountered on the battlefield. Oral history testimonies challenge this claim by showing how African American soldiers did, in fact, train hard and were thereby prepared for war when they went to Korea. The physical conditioning and specialized education they received indicates they were given adequate training before they left for the Korean War. Consequently, private memories shatter the historical narrative that asserts African American soldiers were poorly trained and, therefore, unfit to fight North Korean and Chinese soldiers in Korea.

Historiography addresses the racism African American soldiers faced during basic training as a collective whole. This approach to highlighting racism, however, neglects the voices of individual soldiers who experienced discrimination. In instances where books do provide oral history accounts, they are usually from white officers. In privileging the voices of white officers, historiography gives agency to white officers to the exclusion of Black servicemen. Effectively, White officers are the only voices authorized to speak on race issues that emerged during basic training. Likewise, historiography fails to provide oral history testimonies from African

American soldiers who endured racism. This ultimately creates a biased, distorted portrait of the discrimination that took place at US Army bases during the Korean War era because it ignores the perspective of African American soldiers. By contrast, private memories provide a bottom-up perspective on racism's impact on African American soldiers. Private memories serve to rectify the distortions of conventional historiography by giving African American soldiers a voice. The stories of their experiences serve to expand the narrative of African American soldiers' preparations for the Korean War.

Most importantly, attending to the oral histories of African American servicemen serves to equalize our understanding of the basic training experiences of Black and White soldiers. Indeed, a closer inspection of these narratives reveals their experiences were fairly similar. Both Black and White soldiers went through physically demanding exercises, both were given weapons training, and both were exposed to education beyond combat training. This shows the training of white soldiers was not superior to that given to their African American counterparts. Above all, this indicates that when African American soldiers went to Korea, they were prepared for war. Moreover, historiography overstates the narrative of the failure of African American servicemen, and African American soldiers who failed to meet army requirements failed for reasons that often had nothing to do with their training. The private memories of some African American soldiers and white soldiers expose the racism that prevailed on army bases during the Korean War era. An expanded understanding of the racism experienced by some African American soldiers serves to reveal the extent to which President Truman's Executive Order 9981 did not end racism within the US military. In effect, oral history testimonies challenge the

historical narratives' account of African American soldiers during the Korean War by revealing details that have been overlooked.

The next chapter will focus on combat experiences of African American soldiers during the Korean War. By using oral history testimonies to examine aspects of combat generally omitted from the historical record, I question the claim that African American soldiers were poor combatants. Just as I used oral history testimonies to expand the perspective on how African American soldiers trained, I use private memories to expose the complexities of the combat experience of African American soldiers during the Korean War.

## CHAPTER 3

### COMBAT EXPERIENCES

On June 25, 1950, the Korean War began. North Korean soldiers crossed the thirty-eighth parallel and headed for Seoul, the capital of South Korea. Because the thirty-eighth parallel was the dividing line between North and South Korea, the North Korean Army's decision to cross over the thirty-eighth parallel was viewed as a hostile attack by a foreign aggressor. As an ally to South Korea, the United States immediately sent troops to defend the country. Among the 6.8 million American men and women who served in the US military during the Korean War era, 339,400 were of African American descent.<sup>1</sup> When African American soldiers arrived in Korea, they entered a new world, one filled with novel sights, smells, and people. They saw vast stretches of supply trucks and tents. They saw battle-hardened veterans. They saw the wounded and dead. The first African American soldier set foot on South Korean soil on July 12, 1950.<sup>2</sup> Once settled, African American soldiers took up their wartime duties. Some worked in medical units while others worked on supply lines. Some African American soldiers built bridges and others maintained aircrafts. Many, of course, engaged in combat with the enemy. Hence, I argue that oral history testimonies reveal the internal struggles African American soldiers faced as they fought against North Korean and Chinese soldiers. Using oral history, this chapter will provide a

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<sup>1</sup>“U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs: Data on Veterans of The Korean War – Assistant Secretary for Planning and Analysis Office of Program and Data Analyses,” <http://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/specialreports/kw2000.pdf> (accessed on June 7, 2016).

<sup>2</sup>William T. Bowers, William M. Hammond, and George L. MacGarrigle, *Black Soldier, White Army: The 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment in Korea* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1996), 82.

broader and more accurate depiction of African American soldiers' combat experience in the Korean War—a group generally misunderstood, if not forgotten.

Historiography and private memories both illustrate the experiences of African American soldiers during the Korean War. Historiography, however, provides a general overview of the African American experience and the engagement of African Americans with enemy combatants. In contrast, private memories of African American troops nuance the various experiences African American soldiers had during the war. Historiography leaves out such important aspects as the psychological impact of the war on African American soldiers, while private memories provide a deep and complex portrait of the psychological impact of the Korean War. Close attention to oral history narratives reveal detailed combat experiences of African American soldiers that are unrepresented in the historiography of the war. Additionally, oral history testimonies uncover issues ignored by historiography, such as institutionalized racism and the moral dilemmas that African American soldiers faced in combat. As I show in this chapter, the private memories of African American soldiers not only highlight the details of their experiences in combat, but also expose the internal struggles they faced on the battlefields of Korea.

### **Putting African American Combatants in Context:**

#### **A Segregated Army Still Rife with Racism**

When African American soldiers arrived in Korea at the outset of the Korean War in 1950, the US military was still largely segregated, even though it was moving gradually toward integration following Executive Order 9981. Some branches of the army and certain individual combat units were integrated, while other parts of the US military resisted the change. In *War!*

*What Is It Good For?*, Kimberley Phillips reveals the inconsistent way in which integration was implemented in the US military. According to Phillips, “the army’s process of integration unfolded in uneven and contested patterns. Some white units suddenly became integrated, and a few black officers at the junior ranks arrived to command them.”<sup>3</sup> The integration of African American soldiers was not implemented in a systematic way. Consequently, the US military’s haphazard integration policy created uncertainty for African American soldiers, white soldiers, and US military commanders.

Because the US military’s commitment to desegregating the armed forces was not a priority, many African Americans faced some form of racism while stationed in Korea during the war. Charles Armstrong, one of the first African American commanders of an integrated company, highlights the struggle African American soldiers faced.<sup>4</sup> Armstrong indicates he felt marginalized as an officer because he was subject to personal and institutionalized racism in the US military during the Korean War. As Armstrong put it, “I knew it was a losing battle, but I wanted to serve my country. So few of us were commissioned officers, people were looking to me to be successful. I felt it was my obligation to fight. I thought I would benefit, but I didn’t.”<sup>5</sup> He discovered that even though he served his country honorably, he was still subject to racism within the US military. Armstrong’s struggle to deal with racism while serving his country highlights the complexities some African American officers faced during the Korean War.

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<sup>3</sup>Kimberley Phillips, *War! What Is It Good For?* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 145.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

While Phillips gives firsthand accounts from the African American soldier's perspective, the use of sources like Charles Armstrong poses problems. At first glance, Armstrong's memory appears to give African American soldiers a voice within the historical narrative. Yet oral histories pose a challenge because they purport to speak for a group when instead it is only a cross section of the group that is speaking. In this example, as commanding officer, Armstrong's perspective was representative of elites from the US military, not rank and file African American soldiers. The mere inclusion of an African American voice does not serve to highlight the struggles of the majority of African American servicemen, many of whom felt relegated to the periphery of the US military. Hence, more oral histories of African American servicemen from the Korean War are needed to challenge the conventional historiography that highlights the African American experience during the Korean War.

Although some commanding officers in the US armed forces viewed integration as a pragmatic way to fill their ranks, integration was implemented only gradually. As the Korean War progressed, a shortage in the number of white soldiers available to fight hindered the war effort. To solve this problem, the US military looked to African American soldiers. Commander Butch Barberis' decision to integrate African American soldiers into his fighting unit highlights a weakening of the racist stance that resisted African American servicemen serving alongside white troops. As Barberis put it, "I was very, very low on men—less than half strength—and raised hell to get more troops."<sup>6</sup> Commander Barberis was both desperate for bodies and confident in the fighting prowess of African American troops, and so he decided to integrate African American soldiers into his fighting unit. As he stated, "I was proud to have them. Division Commander Laurence "Dutch" Kesier asked me if I realized what a can of worms I was

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<sup>6</sup>Clay Blair, *The Forgotten War: America in Korea 1950-1953* (New York: Times Books, 1987), 253-254.

opening up, to which I said, “So what? They are good fighting men. I need men.””<sup>7</sup> Barberis’ desire for positive results on the battlefield outweighed any hesitation he may have had about integrated troops.

Clay Blair’s *The Forgotten War* highlights the logic behind why some white commanders sought out African Americans to serve in the US military. Like Phillips, however, Blair fails to incorporate oral history testimonies of African American soldiers who served under Barberis. Instead, the book offers a top-down approach to covering the Korean War that provides a voice to leaders within the US military but fails to give rank and file African American soldiers a chance to deliver their perspective. To give readers of Blair’s book multiple points of view on integration, the book would have benefitted by combining Barberis’ perspective on integrating African American soldiers into his fighting unit with the voices of the African American soldiers who had served with him. This interweaving of experiences would have provided a more complex picture of the process of integration. Instead, the book fails to give African American soldiers a voice within the story and thus provides only a one-dimensional, top-down portrayal of African Americans being integrated into a fighting unit.

Like integration, racism against African American soldiers during the Korean War is a theme frequently explored in historiography. For example, Bowers, Hammond, and MacGarrigle argue in *Black Soldier, White Army* that institutional racism, among other factors, limited the military effectiveness of the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment.<sup>8</sup> According to William T. Bowers, William Hammond, and George MacGarrigle, the unit failed because of “inadequate

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>William T. Bowers, William M. Hammond, and George L. MacGarrigle, *Black Soldier, White Army: The 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment in Korea* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1996), 267.

equipment, inexperience at all levels, leadership failures high and low, casualties among key personnel, and a lack of bonding and cohesion in some units.”<sup>9</sup> The Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment’s poor experience during the war was determined by the lack of quality gear and leadership they received juxtaposed to all white fighting infantry units. Simply put, the book suggests systemic issues embedded within the US military, not the quality of training they received during basic training, were key to the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment’s poor performance on the battlefields in Korea.<sup>10</sup>

Some historians have attacked the credibility of the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment by scrutinizing the unit’s victory at Yechon, its crowning achievement during the war. According to Gerald Astor’s *The Right to Fight: A History of African Americans in the Military*, those who were present at the battle are inadequate narrators of the experience. Astor claims “both official and popular descriptions depend upon the retelling of eyewitnesses—people caught up in the hurly-burly of deadly exchanges—and whose viewpoints may be distorted by self-interest or flaws of memory.”<sup>11</sup> Astor implies that eyewitness accounts of soldiers from the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment were compromised because they had an interest in painting the unit in a positive light at Yechon. While questions of self-interest and veracity are applicable to all eyewitnesses, historians nonetheless recognize the value of first-hand testimony. Oral history testimonies from soldiers that fought at Yechon would provide invaluable insight into their experiences in the battle that should not be overlooked. Ignoring oral history testimonies of

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Gerald Astor, *The Right to Fight: A History of African Americans in the Military* (Novato: Presidio Press, 1998), 355.

African American soldiers who served at Yechon limits the narrative of the battle and deprives the soldiers who fought there of the chance to tell their side of the story.

While some historians have challenged the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment's role in the Battle of Yechon, other historians have sought to comprehend how the US military created the circumstances for the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment to underperform in combat. According to Lyle Rishell's *With a Black Platoon in Combat*, the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment received inferior World War II vintage weapons and communications equipment.<sup>12</sup> Because the weapons were old and outdated, they sometimes broke.<sup>13</sup> Conversely, white units often received newer equipment. The Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment received inferior weapons partially because of the "institutional debilities brought on by the post-World War II drawdown of the Army."<sup>14</sup> In other words, after 1945, the US government shifted its attention away from maintaining the US military since the country did not face any imminent threats. As a consequence of this decision, the US military was creating the circumstances for the unit to fail.

Although the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment is the frequent subject of historiographies of racism during the Korean War, other works suggest racism was not confined to all African American fighting units. For example, subtle racism is described in Alan Gropman's *The Air Force Integrates: 1945-1964*. Subtle racism within the US military often emerged through the decisions that commanding white officers made that were racially motivated. According to Gropman, the Air Force's punishment of African American air controllers highlights racism

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<sup>12</sup>Lyle Rishell, *With a Black Platoon in Combat* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1993), 40.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>William T. Bowers, William M. Hammond, and George L. MacGarrigle, *Black Soldier, White Army: The 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment in Korea* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1996), 65.

within the US military. For example, Gropman notes that “Lt. Gen. Earle E. Partridge, Commander Far East Air Forces (FEAF), decided to remove blacks from duty as forward air controllers after several had twice misdirected fire on friendly troops.”<sup>15</sup> Partridge’s decision was racially motivated. By punishing all African American controllers because of the mistakes of a few, Partridge rationalized all African American controllers performed poorly. The decision to remove all controllers based on race rather than to focus on the individuals responsible for the accidents indicates that racism permeated units beyond the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment.

As with Bowers, Hammond, and MacGarrigle’s book, Gropman’s archives failure to provide a voice to African American soldiers who served in the Air Force during the Korean War. Specifically, Gropman omits any oral history testimony from African American air controllers who served under Partridge’s command. Thus, it is impossible to accurately or objectively evaluate Partridge’s management style, temperament, or judgment because the African American soldiers under his authority were not given a chance to present their side of the story. If African American controllers who worked for Partridge had been interviewed for Gropman’s book, their stories would likely have exposed his subtle racism.

### **The Twenty-Fourth Infantry in Contemporary Historiography**

The failure of contemporary historiography to provide a voice to rank and file African American soldiers who served during the Korean War era is compounded by the tendency of some history books to frame those soldiers in a negative light, especially the soldiers of the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment. Although often overlooked, racism in historiography is reflected in the historical narrative’s top-down histories that tend to gloss over the racism

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<sup>15</sup>Alan Gropman, *The Air Force Integrates: 1945-1964* (Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1978), 147.

experienced by African American servicemen. Subsequently, the failure of historiography to address the racism African American soldiers experienced during the war is, in itself, a form of insidious racism.

Historiography's racist portrayal of African American soldiers is highlighted in a number of books that address the Korean War. For example, books such as Max Hasting's *The Korean War* assert that units like the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment did not fight courageously. According to Hasting, "The pattern of the 24<sup>th</sup>'s first action was repeated in the days that followed, with men streaming toward the rear as soon as darkness provided cover for their retreat."<sup>16</sup> The Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment, the largest black fighting unit in the Korean War, is vilified in the book as underperforming.<sup>17</sup> Hasting later stated that the poor performance of the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment encouraged decision-makers in the US military to expedite integration of the US military. Hasting aligns with other historiographies that illustrate the ways in which African American soldiers did not meet expectations while also overlooking the role institutional racism had on African American soldiers' performance on the battlefield.

Others, like Bowers, Hammond, and MacGarrigle in *Black Soldier, White Army*, question the role the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment played at Yechon. According to Bowers, Hammond, and MacGarrigle, "Yech'on was enough of a victory to cause elation at Eighth Army

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<sup>16</sup>Max Hasting, *The Korean War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 80.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 80. According to *With a Black Platoon in Combat*, Yechon "was the first city recaptured by American troops, and the success of the battle gave the rest of us a much-needed morale lift. While not a major battle, it was a symbolic victory for US ground troops and was so reported in the Congressional Record shortly thereafter" (34-35). For some, the victory was an affirmation of the fighting prowess of African American soldiers within the US military during the Korean War. Not only did the victory prove African Americans could fight effectively, but it also indicated that they were capable of making necessary modifications to achieve their goals. "One of the lessons learned early on was that our training methods and our fighting skills had to be modified in Korea" (38). African American soldiers developed their fields of fire and determined the most likely route North Koreans would choose for attack (38). In spite of these preparations, African American soldiers were not prepared for "night fighting, guerrilla tactics, or mass attacks" (38). To win, African American soldiers were forced to adjust to these new tactics.

headquarters, but the Far East Command in Japan paid little attention.”<sup>18</sup> To reinforce this point, William T. Bowers, William M. Hammond, and George L. MacGarrigle suggest, “General MacArthur and his officers afforded it scant notice, crediting the achievement to the South Koreans in official communiqués.”<sup>19</sup> Problematically, the principal argument of William T. Bowers, William M. Hammond, and George L. MacGarrigle’s *Black Soldier, White Army* is that Yechon was a United Nations victory achieved without the aid of the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment. The claim that the battle of Yechon was won by the South Korean Army and the United Nations Armed Forces minimizes the importance of the battle and degrades the role the Twenty Fourth Infantry Regiment had in securing the victory. Consequently, William T. Bowers, William M. Hammond, and George L. MacGarrigle devalue the Twenty Fourth Infantry Regiment’s contribution to the war effort.

Suspicion of the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment is not limited to the fighting prowess of its members. Instead, some books, like Roy Appleman’s *The Korean War*, go so far as to suggest that the battle of Yechon never took place. As Clay Blair asserted in *The Forgotten War*, “Army historian Roy Appleman, in his account of the Korean War, sneered at the Yechon fight, expressing doubt there had been any action ‘at all’ and suggesting that the NKPA (North Korean People’s Army) had withdrawn from the town before the BCT (Philippine Army Battalion Combat Teams) got there.”<sup>20</sup> Appleman’s claim undermines the legacy of the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment’s participation in the Korean War. Appleman is an outlier, as the vast majority of historians recognize the Battle of Yechon. Nonetheless, Appleman’s assertion is instructive.

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<sup>18</sup>Bowers, Hammond, and MacGarrigle, *Black Soldier, White Army*, 93.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Blair, *The Forgotten War*, 153.

By claiming the Battle of Yechon was a fictional battle, he erases the contributions the Twenty Fourth Infantry Regiment made to the war effort.

### **A Closer Examination of the Enemy: North Korean and Chinese Soldiers**

Historiography reveals that African American soldiers respected North Korean and Chinese soldiers as worthy adversaries on the battlefield. Historians often depict North Korean and Chinese soldiers as tough, brutal, and intelligent fighters, and trace how North Korean soldiers used these characteristics to their advantage when confronting US soldiers. According to Lyle Rishell's *With a Black Platoon in Combat*, "The North Koreans would attack en masse along the front, striking a particular position, and if they could not take the objective, their forces would flow around the ends and attack from the flanks."<sup>21</sup> One African American soldier described how North Korean soldiers would come "right into your foxhole, try and shoot you or stab you or bite you if they didn't have a weapon. Just fanatical as hell."<sup>22</sup> Historiography suggests North Koreans would use any weapon at their disposal to kill US soldiers. Given these representations, the historical narrative indicates African American soldiers respected North Korean and Chinese battle strategies and their zeal for engaging African American soldiers in combat.

Although most books that address the African American experience during the war fail to use oral history testimonies, some historians have used private memories to explore the perception African American soldiers had of the enemy. Michael Green's *Black Yanks in the Pacific*, for example, uses oral history testimonies to examine North Korean soldiers' fighting

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<sup>21</sup>Rishell, *Black Platoon in Combat*, 39.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 133.

tactics against US forces. According to one soldier, an American lieutenant, the North Koreans “were vicious people. They mutilated bodies. They shot prisoners. Just nasty, nasty people.”<sup>23</sup>

Although Michael Green’s *Black Yanks in the Pacific* draws on oral history testimonies, Green’s archive is composed exclusively of soldiers in leadership positions. The book’s failure to use oral history testimonies from rank and file African American soldiers who engaged North Korean and Chinese soldiers yields an incomplete picture of how average African American soldiers viewed North Korean and Chinese troops. Using the oral history testimony of a lieutenant provides only a top-down perspective on the subject.

In addition to North Korean soldiers being portrayed as effective fighters, historiography also indicates the North Korean Army (NKPA) used unconventional means to fight against US forces. For instance, the NKPA used children to kill American soldiers. According to Green, “a Korean boy ran up to one of the vehicles calling out ‘GI!’ and, raising his arms, dropped two grenades. The explosions killed everyone inside.”<sup>24</sup> Using children to kill American soldiers was ruthless but shrewd. Because children are usually viewed as nonthreatening, the NKPA knew children could get close to US soldiers and kill them.

In spite of the NKPA’s cunningness in using children to kill American soldiers, the NKPA took advantage of rules of engagement established in the Geneva Convention of 1949, leaving American soldiers open for potential attacks. The Geneva Convention of 1949 was established to ensure civilians were not hurt during armed conflict between two opposing armies. According to Article 4 of the Geneva Convention of 1949, “Persons protected by the Convention

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<sup>23</sup>Michael Green, *Black Yanks in the Pacific: Race in the Making of American Military Empire after World War II* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 133.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 133.

are those who, at a given moment and in any manner whatsoever, find themselves, in case of a conflict or occupation, in the hands of a Party to the conflict or Occupying Power of which they are not nationals.”<sup>25</sup> Since North Korean children were considered civilians under the Geneva Conventions, children were protected from hostilities from US armed forces. So NKPA’s usage of children gave them an unfair advantage during armed combat with the US military.

Despite the legality of the military strategy, oral history testimonies from African American soldiers who encountered North Korean child fighters would have shed light on their tactics and how frequently they were used in battle. On the one hand, attention to oral history testimonies from rank and file African American soldiers shows us how North Korean and Chinese soldiers used a variety of different strategies to fight against American soldiers. On the other hand, they reveal how African Americans perceived those soldiers. Hence, private memories not only provide a more authentic perspective on how North Korean and Chinese soldiers fought, but they also uncover the conclusions African American soldiers drew from their engagement with enemy combatants.

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<sup>25</sup>“Geneva Convention Article 4, 1949,” <https://www.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl.nsf/ART/365-570008?OpenDocument> (accessed on March 15, 2016).

### **A Closer Examination of the Enemy: Weather**

Even though North Korean and Chinese soldiers often used unconventional tactics to fight American soldiers, communist troops were not the only adversaries African American soldiers faced. Cold weather during the Korean War was a tough and unrelenting foe. Michael Green's *Black Yanks in the Pacific* highlights the cold and brutal weather conditions African American soldiers faced when they arrived in Korea. Green describes a "seventeen-year-old black GI [who] arrived in December 1950 to find the Chinese routing American forces and colder weather than he had ever experienced."<sup>26</sup> According to Green, the "winter air heavy with the smell of burning flesh, garlic, and gunpowder," greeted American soldiers.<sup>27</sup> Like white soldiers, some African American soldiers got frostbite, and others died of hypothermia. Frigid temperatures posed a significant threat to all soldiers stationed in Korea, but African American soldiers were especially vulnerable to the weather given their inadequate clothing and sleeping quarters.

Tellingly, the weather conditions could have been mitigated with proper equipment. Warm jackets, gloves, and hats could have shielded African Americans from the harsh temperatures. Nevertheless, institutionalized racism contributed to the challenges cold weather posed for African American soldiers. As with weaponry, the US military did not provide African American soldiers with the adequate equipment to face the cold weather. Instead, African American soldiers had to make do with used cold-weather gear that was insufficient and unreliable. For example, according to Bowers, Hammond, and MacGarrigle, the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment was given the opportunity to choose "one fur or pile-lined garment, be it a

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 131-132.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

field jacket, cap, or gloves.”<sup>28</sup> As a result of these restrictions, African American soldiers were forced to choose which extremities they would cover and which ones they would leave exposed to the weather. The insufficient supplies increased the likelihood African Americans soldiers would suffer injury or die from the frigid temperatures. Consequently, a number of African American soldiers died of hypothermia, and many more got frostbite.<sup>29</sup> White soldiers were not forced to choose which extremities to cover and were issued an adequate supply of cold-weather gear. Thus, frigid temperatures in conjunction with institutionalized racism posed a serious threat to African American soldiers in Korea.

While William T. Bowers, William M. Hammond, and George L. MacGarrigle highlight the various ways in which the cold weather affected African American soldiers, the authors fail to provide oral history testimonies of African American soldiers who experienced cold weather during the Korean War. This lack of personal testimony detracts from the argument. The book ignores the survival techniques African American soldiers used to stay warm and the emotional impact the weather had on African American soldiers. Without a firsthand perspective, neither the authors nor their readers can imagine or evaluate the soldiers’ survival techniques or begin to measure the degree to which cold temperatures impacted African American soldiers during the Korean War.

The limited historiographical methods I have described omit key aspects of African American soldiers’ combat experiences during the Korean War. Chief among these overlooked issues are the impact of integration on African American soldiers and the extent to which racism affected their experiences. The following sections will draw on oral history testimonies to

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<sup>28</sup>Bowers, Hammond, and MacGarrigle, *Black Soldier, White Army*, 190.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

examine the heroism of African American soldiers who served in the Korean War and the moral dilemmas they faced during combat. Such private memories highlight various aspects of the experiences of African American soldiers who served in the Korean War, which have been inadequately covered in historiography.

### **The Aftermath of Desegregation: Physical Violence and Institutionalized Racism**

In addition to oral testimonies highlighting the various opinions of African American and white soldiers on integration, private memories also expose the racism African American soldiers experienced during the war. That experience of racism can be broken into three types: physical racism, institutionalized racism, and a subtle, passive-aggressive form of racism. These various forms of racism were so prevalent that every African American veteran I interviewed expressed his experience with at least one form while stationed in Korea, and a few soldiers described an encounter with two or all three.

Physical violence against African American soldiers as a result of racism plays a prominent role in some oral history testimonies of African American veterans. For example, Clarence Senor highlights how some white soldiers used violence to intimidate African Americans in his description of physical altercations while stationed in Korea. According to Senor, he was forced to defend himself from a racially motivated attack. After a white soldier from Alabama pushed him down to the ground, Senor got up and hit him.<sup>30</sup> Reflecting on the incident, the violence Senor experienced was an attempt to intimidate him. Senor said, “Where I come from, I don’t care what you say. I get to hold my own.”<sup>31</sup> Although Senor refused to allow

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<sup>30</sup>Clarence Senor, interviewed by Mark DePue. Springfield, Illinois, November 5, 2008.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

another soldier that harbored racist sentiments to degrade him, his commanding officer expected such behavior. As a result of their altercation, Senor and the white soldier were summoned to their captain. Senor recalls the captain's statement to him that, "You people have to expect this from these guys."<sup>32</sup> In other words, the captain suggested that African American soldiers should expect racially motivated violence while serving in the at least nominally desegregated military.

The captain's claim that race-based violence was inevitable also reflects a form of institutionalized racism. When the captain continued his lecture, however, Senor continued to resist. He recalls insisting the white soldier "didn't have no right to call me out of my name, you know."<sup>33</sup> Again, the captain responded by encouraging Senor's resignation: "Yeah, but you have to expect that."<sup>34</sup> Incensed, Senor then violated protocol and insulted the captain, "Well, you son of a bitch, I don't need to."<sup>35</sup> Unaware of the irony, the captain said, "You can't talk to me like that."<sup>36</sup> Senor responded by saying, "That's what I've been trying to tell you."<sup>37</sup> The captain turned red in the face and told Senor to "get on back to work."<sup>38</sup> Ultimately, neither Senor nor the white soldier was punished for the altercation. His story functions as a testament to the physical violence some African American soldiers endured as a result of racism during the Korean War.

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

Senor's altercation with a fellow soldier is revealing because it highlights two forms of racism: physical racism and institutionalized racism. First, the fight Senor had with the white soldier illustrates physical racism. The fact that the white soldier assaulted Senor to "put him in his place" suggests the white soldier was racist. Second, the captain's response to the racially motivated fight highlights institutional racism. The captain's explanation that the assault on him should be tolerated because the white soldier was from the South indicates that the captain was giving tacit consent for the racially motivated attack. Moreover, since the captain was the judge and jury for this physical confrontation, his decision not to punish the white soldier for assaulting Senor was reflective of a willingness within the US military to not address racism inflicted upon African American soldiers. In effect, the captain's decision to do nothing suggests that racist acts toward African American soldiers were an accepted practice.

Along with the physical racism that African American soldiers faced daily, institutional racism toward African American soldiers was also common. Examples of institutionalized racism include the inferior weapons and cold-weather gear that African American soldiers, including the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment, received. James Williams, a machine gunner for the Twenty-Fourth and Twenty-Seventh Infantry Regiments, indicated the African American infantry unit was given inferior clothing. Williams observed that in the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment, the military-issued "boots and things is used boots. Everything's used. You didn't get nothing new."<sup>39</sup> Old and unreliable supplies given to African American soldiers often broke down while they were out on the front lines fighting. The lack of quality clothing and supplies was detrimental to and became a distraction for African American soldiers as they engaged in combat with North Korean and Chinese soldiers.

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<sup>39</sup>James Williams, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Chicago, Illinois, January 12, 2015.

The disadvantage of old and worn gear was compounded by the low quality of weapons issued to African American soldiers. As Williams put it, “We had the World War II equipment. It broke down.”<sup>40</sup> Williams observed that machine guns used in black regiments were less reliable than machine guns used in white regiments. As Williams explained, “We didn’t ever get no new barrels, see? In a machine gun, you can burn the barrel out. You can fire it until the barrel turns cherry red. When it’s like that you done burned it out.”<sup>41</sup> Williams added, “In the middle of the fire fight, you got to change this barrel, put another barrel in, and start back to work again.”<sup>42</sup> The poor quality of equipment provided to the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment sent a powerful message to its African American soldiers: the US military did not value their contributions to the war effort in Korea.

In contrast, white soldiers were outfitted with new gear and weapons. Indeed, when Williams went to the Twenty-Seventh Infantry Regiment, he saw the difference in stark contrast.<sup>43</sup> He reports that the Twenty-Seventh Infantry Regiment, which was a desegregated unit during the war “got brand new barrels”<sup>44</sup> for their machine guns that did not break down. The decision to issue the Twenty-Seventh Infantry Regiment new equipment while restricting the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment to old equipment was racially motivated. Ultimately, this form of institutional racism created conditions for the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment to fail by ill-equipping it for combat and by demoralizing it.

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

Not only do oral history testimonies suggest that African American soldiers received inferior weapons, but they also show they were required to fight under conditions that were inhumane. Williams' oral history testimony asserts that the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment stayed out of fighting on the front line longer than other infantry units. According to Williams, "We were supposed to run all over Korea. We stayed on the line, at one time, 72 days straight."<sup>45</sup> As a result of remaining constantly on the front line, instead of having spells of rest in the relative safety of the rear, the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment became worn out. Fatigued and unable to fight effectively, the unit was unaware that not every unit fought as long or as hard as it did. Indeed, Williams learned that the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment was being mistreated only after he left the regiment. As he would later learn, "You were supposed to be on there for thirty days. I didn't know that until I went to the white outfit."<sup>46</sup> Because the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment stayed out on the front line for twice the period of time as a typical infantry unit, it became exhausted. The Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment's experiences of staying on the front lines for an extraordinary period of time reveal how institutional racism directly impacted them.

Institutional racism shaped the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment's time on the line as well as the kinds of fronts they faced. Not only was the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment issued old weapons and gear and kept on the front lines for twice the usual amount of time, Williams suggested that the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment was subjected to heavy combat more often than other regiments. As Williams put it, "Anywhere there's a hot spot at, that's where they're

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<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid.

going to send the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment. The second division's being overrun. We got to go up there and pull them out there."<sup>47</sup> Williams's oral history testimony reveals that the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment, at least from his perspective, was mismanaged by the US military. With inferior weapons and with little time off to recharge, the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment was not given a chance to prove itself. According to Williams, the decision to overwork the Twenty Fourth Infantry Regiment without a break, coupled with the decision to give them old weapons, set the unit up for failure. Williams' observations reveal the depth and breadth of institutional racism facing African American soldiers during the war.

The institutional racism the Twenty Fourth Infantry unit faced is corroborated by the oral history testimonies of white soldiers from the Korean War. According to Robert Barry, a white soldier who served during the Korean War, "We spent 30 days on the line under enemy fire."<sup>48</sup> After spending a month on the front lines, he and his unit were pulled back to get some rest. As Barry put it, "it was 30 on and 30 off."<sup>49</sup> Barry's account reaffirms the point that white units were given more time off than black units like the Twenty-Fourth Infantry. With more time off to rest, white units were able to recoup from battle fatigue. Ultimately, this helped white units stay focused as they engaged with enemy combatants.

Some forms of racism were less visible than physical violence or the unreliable equipment given to black soldiers. For example, the types of jobs African American soldiers were assigned to in the US military also reflected institutional racism. According to Williams,

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<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

<sup>48</sup>Robert Barry, interviewed by Nick Miller. Personal Interview, May 26, 2002.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid.

the US military “treated the black soldiers bad.”<sup>50</sup> He observed that African Americans during the Korean War “got all the shit detail and everything.”<sup>51</sup> As he put it, “African American guys would be riding around on the back of the garbage truck and white officers out there playing ball, eating ice cream.”<sup>52</sup> Williams’ statement highlighted a disparity between the types of jobs black and white soldiers were assigned to during the Korean War. In Williams’ eyes, black soldiers had the least-desirable and most labor-intensive jobs. For example, African Americans “were mining coal out there. Coal cars line up to the street. If it was 100 guys out there shoveling coal, ninety-seven of them was colored.”<sup>53</sup> Such decisions to reserve the worst jobs for African American soldiers reveal institutional racism.

In addition to the US military’s poor handling of the deployment of the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment and the unfair distribution of heavy labor, some African American soldiers faced abuse by their commanding officers. As a soldier, A. J. Nero’s duty was to guard buildings during the war, a responsibility given to many soldiers. Nevertheless, unlike other soldiers, Nero was sometimes required to guard a building for several days at a time.<sup>54</sup> On one particular day, Nero was on duty all day.<sup>55</sup> As he recalls, “They put me on the post to guard, and around about six o’clock, nobody had come to relieve me.”<sup>56</sup> He stayed at his post all night. When he went

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<sup>50</sup>James Williams, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Chicago, Illinois, January 12, 2015.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid.

<sup>54</sup>A. J. Nero, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Chicago, Illinois, November 14, 2014. While Nero did see combat during the war, he acknowledged that most of his time was spent “in Korea, in a non-fighting situation.”

<sup>55</sup>Ibid.

down to breakfast, his commanding officer said, “I need a runner today. All right, Nero, you’re the runner.” Yet when Nero responded, “I was told I was getting my rest today, I wasn’t relieved last night,”<sup>57</sup> Nero’s commanding officer replied, “You heard what I said. Get your rifle, let’s go.”<sup>58</sup> While Nero was following his orders, he was wounded. Nero’s experience guarding a building for hours without a break reflects the abusive and subtle nature of discrimination entrenched within the supposedly desegregated military.

One commonality of these stories of institutional racism is that they go against normal military procedure. Indeed, both the example of deploying the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment to the front for twice as long as white infantry units, along with Nero’s directive to guard a building for an extended period of time, was unusual. Significantly, such deviations from standard operating procedure reflect not only institutional racism, but also poor military management. For example, Nero got wounded carrying out an order from his commanding officer to run an errand to the front lines. With little sleep, Nero was more susceptible to making a mistake. Thus, the extraordinary demands the US military placed on some African American fighting units and individual soldiers indicate that racism, both overt and covert, existed during the Korean War and effectively put the war effort at risk.

### **A New Vision of African American Soldiers in Korea**

While historiography has overlooked the specificity of the African American soldier’s experience of combat in Korea, private memories highlight the racism African Americans faced in the US military and illustrate their combat experiences. One example of the Twenty-Fourth

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<sup>56</sup>Ibid.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid.

Infantry Regiment's contribution to the Korean War is the significant sacrifices the unit made during the war. During the Korean War, the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment suffered heavy casualties. Curtis Morrow, a member of the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment fighting unit, endured higher casualty rates juxtaposed to other fighting units within the US military. According to Morrow, "Out of the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment, say, a third of our people, our troops, was killed in action."<sup>59</sup> Later, Morrow asserted that the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment lost a significant number of men during armed conflict. According to Morrow, "The Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment was composed of 3,000 men, our regiment. One-third of them was killed in action. The exact figure was like 900 men were killed in action. That's not counting the wounded. Two-thirds was wounded seriously."<sup>60</sup> The Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment Combat Team, like many other regiments, sustained heavy losses. Likewise, Company B, another infantry unit within the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment, sustained numerous casualties.<sup>61</sup> According to William T. Bowers, William M. Hammond, and George L. MacGarrigle, "Company B experienced 26 casualties among its officers and NCOs between July and September."<sup>62</sup> While these statistics reveal the loss of life the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment sustained during the Korean War, oral history testimonies expose the nuances of the combat experiences of African American soldiers that are not highlighted within data.

Historiography claims African American soldiers were inept fighters, usually by drawing on the experiences of the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment, as we have seen. Oral history

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<sup>59</sup>Curtis Morrow, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Chicago, Illinois, January 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid.

<sup>61</sup>Bowers, Hammond, and MacGarrigle, *Black Soldier, White Army*, 75.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid.

testimonies, nevertheless, challenge this assertion by reflecting African American soldiers' abilities to study their enemies and to fight them more effectively. For instance, Morrow became keenly aware of the sights and smells around him during his service in Korea. As a scout in the US Army, Morrow developed a sixth sense. According to Morrow, "We all got to smell them, you know. And what a miracle, so they can hear us for the most part because you make a lot of noise when you're walking. And then everybody got different odors, body odors, and so it starts to hit the wind, and you could sense them, and you can smell them."<sup>63</sup> While Morrow's depiction of North Korean and Chinese soldiers as having a distinct smell was racist, his usage of this technique reveals the measures he took to protect himself and his unit from walking into ambushes set up by enemy combatants. By picking up on their smell, Morrow was able to fire at North Korean and Chinese soldiers that were hidden from the eye. Morrow's ability to identify the smell of North Korean and Chinese soldiers reveals that some African American soldiers used creative means to fight the enemy. Hence, because historiography fails to include the creative ways in which some African American soldiers fought against enemy combatants, the historical narrative presents the African American experience during combat within narrowly defined parameters.

Private memories also work to reframe historiography's portrayal of African American soldiers during combat, particularly in the Battle of Yechon. While the Battle of Yechon is highlighted within historiography as inconsequential, private memories suggest otherwise. For

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<sup>63</sup>Curtis Morrow, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Chicago, Illinois, January 7, 2015. Jesse Jenkins, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Crown Point, Indiana, February 18, 2015. Jenkins stated that North Korean and Chinese soldiers ambushed US Armed Forces often. According to Jenkins, "You would have roads full of refugees... people pushing baby carriages down the road. It might have been a baby in the carriage and they may not have been. It may have been a machine gun."

example, Colonel Bussey's autobiography, *Firefight at Yechon*, disputes this claim. Bussey's book illustrates the courage, sacrifice, and determination of African American soldiers in combat. According to Bussey, during the Battle of Yechon, "We continued to rain heavy fire from our hilltop. The enemy mortar stayed close on us, dumping shell fragments all around. I was ashamed of the slaughter before me, but this was my job, my duty, and my responsibility."<sup>64</sup> Colonel Bussey killed numerous North Koreans as he, along with his troops, took Yechon. Despite Roy Appleman's claim to the contrary, the medals Bussey won for his military exploits at Yechon suggest the battle did take place and that African Americans served honorably in that conflict. According to Bussey, "It is hard for me to understand how the US Army's official history could say that the Battle of Yechon simply did not occur. I was there when the 25th Infantry Division Commander, Major General Kean, came to the regiment and pinned a Silver Star on my chest for my actions at Yechon."<sup>65</sup> Historiographies that downplay the significance of Yechon minimize a military victory that was a key part of the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment's contribution to the US military war effort. Bussey's autobiography challenges historiography that diminishes the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment's military exploits by highlighting his and other African American soldiers' bravery at Yechon.

Along with Bussey's autobiography, other oral history testimonies pay tribute to the heroics African American soldiers made during combat situations. One example of the courage some African American soldiers displayed during combat is when James Lacy, a member of the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment, saved his unit from being annihilated by North Korean and

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<sup>64</sup>Charles M. Bussey, *Firefight at Yechon: Courage and Racism in the Korean War* (Riverside: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1991), 104.

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*, 108.

Chinese soldiers. The Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment was on the verge of being overrun by North Korean forces because one of its machine guns was malfunctioning. Captain Steinberg, Lacy's commanding officer, told him, "I need you to go up there and repair that machine gun because we are going to be attacked. Intelligence told us we are going to be attacked. I need that machine gun working, the second platoon."<sup>66</sup> Lacy accepted the responsibility, telling his Captain, "I'll go up there and repair it."<sup>67</sup> With two military escorts, Lacy made his way up to the machine gun. According to Lacy, "We maneuvered our way up to where the machine gun was. Got up there, and I'm up there just feeling the way, and I repaired the machine gun."<sup>68</sup> Lacy returned to his camp after fixing the machine gun. Lacy's heroism challenges the historical narrative that argues African American soldiers were ill prepared for the challenges they faced in the Korean War.

Lacy's selfless act in the face of a pending attack is among many stories that have been left out of the historical narrative. As Lacy was returning to his camp, enemy troops started to attack the position without machine gun coverage. According to Lacy, "The North Koreans say, 'it's no machine gun coming from here, so that's the way we're going to hit.'"<sup>69</sup> The North Koreans, he added, "all got together, and they were going to come about the second, but I had fixed the machine gun, and it started shooting. It just started mowing them down."<sup>70</sup> Lacy was modest about his achievement but reported his captain's appreciation. According to Lacy, "The captain said, 'You saved a lot of guys because there's a machine gun for the first platoon, second

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<sup>66</sup>James Lacy, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Chicago, Illinois, January 20, 2015.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid.

platoon, third platoon. We don't have no machine gun in fourth.”<sup>71</sup> The captain added, “I thank you for doing that, and I'm going to give you a medal. I'm going to put you in for a Silver Star because of all the guys you saved.”<sup>72</sup> Ultimately, however, Lacy was not acknowledged by the US military for his military accomplishments. While Lacy's captain was sleeping, an enemy combatant slipped into their camp, located the captain, and killed him. Lacy noted that, “He was a good captain though, Captain Steinberg, very good man, but never got a chance to put me up for that medal. I just forgot about it, I just said, ‘Well, that's all right.’”<sup>73</sup> Because of the death of his captain, Lacy's heroics during battle were not acknowledged by the US military. Only through an oral history interview did the story of his training with machine guns and the risk he took to save the lives of the men in his unit come to light.

The uniqueness of his story notwithstanding, the principal significance of Lacy's military exploits is its challenge to the concept, regularly presented by historiography, that African American soldiers were incompetent. Stories of heroism like Lacy's are not presented in history books because historians have not prioritized incorporating oral history testimonies of African American soldiers into their books. Historiography's omission of the heroic deeds of African American soldiers during the Korean War ensures that they are not given full credit for their military achievements.

In addition to Lacy's, other oral testimonies indicate that African American soldiers were willing to fight hard and sacrifice their lives to defend their country. For example, Walter Lee

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<sup>71</sup>Ibid.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid.

Dowdy recalls getting wounded by mortar fire during the Korean War.<sup>74</sup> Dowdy was coming down a hill when, as he says, “*BAM*. Everything was black. I felt something running down my face.” Eventually he passed out from his wound. He eventually was taken to a hospital and treated for his injuries. Dowdy’s injury reveals the sacrifice some African American soldiers made as they engaged with enemy combatants. Similarly, Roy Dell Johnson was driving in a convoy from Pusan when it was suddenly ambushed. During the encounter with North Korean soldiers, a bullet went through Johnson’s “cheek, and it came out [his] lip.”<sup>75</sup> Johnson was sent to a hospital, treated for his wounds, and sent back to the front lines. Due to Johnson’s fighting prowess, he would get wounded several more times in combat operations. In fact, Johnson was wounded on three separate occasions. Thus, oral testimonies challenge the notion that African American soldiers did not serve honorably during the Korean War. African American soldiers were on the front line and were risking injury and death with regularity. The wartime injuries described by African American soldiers such as Dowdy and Johnson suggest that they were willing to sacrifice their lives for their country.

In spite of their absence in historiography, details of the bloody engagements between African American troops and North Korean and Chinese soldiers provide further evidence that African American soldiers served honorably. For example, Johnson describes meeting fierce

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<sup>74</sup>Walter Lee Dowdy, interviewed by Michael Willie. Personal Interview, Chattanooga, Tennessee, February 18, 2004.

<sup>75</sup>Roy Dell Johnson, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Arlington, Texas, March 2, 2015. Oral history testimonies reveal how some African American soldiers paid with their lives fighting for America. John Thomas’ experiences in Korea include the loss of his friend. According to Thomas, “I was in a foxhole one time with my buddy, in a foxhole, and we were fighting at the enemy, and all of a sudden I noticed he had slumped over, and I thought he was sleep. I thought he was asleep or whatever, so I looked down and he was gone.” John Thomas, interviewed by Brianna Brooks. Personal Interview, Indianapolis, Indiana, October 4, 2009. In effect, some oral history testimonies reveal the bravery and sacrifice displayed by African American soldiers during combat in the Korean War. This portrayal of African American soldiers in combat refutes a strand of historiography that asserts African American soldiers were of poor quality.

resistance when he landed at Inchon along with other American soldiers. According to Johnson, North Koreans subjected American troops to heavy artillery fire upon their landing. With bullets flying and mortars exploding, Americans suffered heavy losses as they sought to search the beach and surrounding area at Inchon. Johnson remembered the landing as “a horrible sight, you know. The—the thing looking like Kool-Aid out there. On your . . . [It was] red, man.”<sup>76</sup> Johnson recalls that the Battle of Inchon “was very, very stressful.”<sup>77</sup> During this violent campaign, Johnson “got a big, big piece of shrapnel” lodged in his body.<sup>78</sup> Despite his wounds, Johnson took part in the UN military push that threw the North Koreans back to the Chosin Reservoir. Hence, Johnson’s heroism illustrated in his oral history testimony provides a deeper understanding of the sacrifices African American soldiers made that is not offered in historiography.

A. J. Nero, a platoon leader who earned his Purple Heart after he was wounded in battle, tells a similar story of honorable service in combat. During Nero’s first day in combat, he was wounded. According to Nero, “My squad leader asked me [if I knew] that my weapon wasn’t firing. I told him, ‘Yes, I know it.’”<sup>79</sup> Later, after Nero had fixed his weapon, his commanding officer was still not convinced that he had a working weapon and asked for proof. He said, “Show me.”<sup>80</sup> Accordingly, Nero pointed his gun at a stone in the middle of the front line.<sup>81</sup> Nevertheless, Nero’s squad leader redirected him and told him to “shoot it over in the enemy

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<sup>76</sup>Ibid.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid.

<sup>79</sup>A. J. Nero, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Chicago, Illinois, November 14, 2014.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid.

line,” because “you might hit one of the Gooks.”<sup>82</sup> Nero fired his gun pursuant to his squad leader’s direction. In response, however, a North Korean soldier fired back, “chipping the dirt right in front of” Nero.<sup>83</sup> Vulnerable and exposed, Nero, along with the rest of his squad, started to run away from the North Koreans, who began firing at them and coming after them. According to Nero, “We took off, but they caught us. They killed him, but I got wounded and about six others [did, too]. Just a little thing like that happened.”<sup>84</sup> African American soldiers were in the heart of combat and fought valiantly. Despite historiography’s omission of these stories, attention to oral history testimonies serve to expand our appreciation for African American soldiers and our understanding of their service and sacrifice.

### **Consequences of the Cold: African American Perspectives**

Although war movies suggest military life is comprised exclusively of combat, personal narratives of military service serve to underscore how more quotidian issues, such as the cold, could dominate a soldier’s life. Indeed, while glossed over in historiography, oral history testimonies reveal the significant impact of weather on African American soldiers. During the war, African American soldiers faced extreme cold in Korea’s mountainous regions, as we have seen. The cold temperatures affected African American soldiers to a greater extent because they were under-equipped for it. The Twenty-Fourth Infantry’s arrival in Korea illustrates the fatal potential of the cold. When Curtis Morrow landed at Inchon, he, along with other members of the Twenty-Fourth, witnessed “frozen bodies of American soldiers that were being sent back” on

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<sup>82</sup>Ibid.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid. James Wiggins, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Augusta, Georgia, April 8, 2003. A.J. Nero’s shrapnel injury was a common injury among many US soldiers. James Wiggins, for example, was hit by shrapnel on July the 13, 1950. He later had to leave the Korean War after he injured his left leg and left foot.

the back of trucks.<sup>85</sup> Like white soldiers, African American soldiers were dying not only from bullets and shrapnel, but also from frigid temperatures. Morrow's original encounter anticipated the cold, blustery conditions he would face himself.

Other oral history testimonies corroborate Morrow's description of frigid weather. Jesse Jenkins suggested "it got 40 below in the woods over there."<sup>86</sup> James Lacy indicated it got "as cold as 50 degrees" below zero.<sup>87</sup> Although historiography acknowledges the temperature lows revealed in books like William T. Bowers, William M. Hammond, and George L. MacGarrigle's *Black Soldier, White Army*, oral history testimonies give dimensionality to the challenges of this reality. For example, due to the lower temperatures, everything around the soldiers froze. As Morrow noted, "The food is frozen. Everything is frozen. You eat snow for water. The water is frozen, man. Everything is frozen. You take a leak. It's frozen before it hits the . . ." Morrow laughed before continuing, "Everything is froze. Your breath. If you've got a mustache, that's froze."<sup>88</sup> To make matters worse, the US military did not give African American soldiers the proper equipment to fight off the cold temperatures. As Lacy put it, "We didn't have the proper equipment. We didn't have nothing like that that's proper."<sup>89</sup> Consequently, the freezing temperatures, coupled with the lack of good equipment to stave off the cold weather, made soldiers susceptible to frostbite and, in some cases, caused their deaths.

While historiography describes the frigid temperatures African American soldiers endured during the Korean War, oral history testimonies highlight the impact cold temperatures

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<sup>85</sup>Curtis Morrow, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Chicago, Illinois, January 7, 2015.

<sup>86</sup>Jesse Jenkins, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Crown Point, Indiana, February 18, 2015.

<sup>87</sup>James Lacy, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Chicago, Illinois, January 20, 2015.

<sup>88</sup>Curtis Morrow, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Chicago, Illinois, January 7, 2015.

<sup>89</sup>James Lacy, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Chicago, Illinois, January 20, 2015.

had on African American soldiers and how they coped with it. To survive the cold temperatures, African American soldiers had to develop a variety of different methods to stay warm. Lacy, for example, describes how he handled the discomfort and danger of wet feet after marching for long hours. To ensure that he had a dry pair of socks to wear the next day and thereby avoid immersion (trench) foot, Lacy took off his socks and put them in his armpits each night.<sup>90</sup> Sleeping bags presented another challenge to both staying warm and staying alive. Using sleeping bags came with risk. Chinese and North Koreans often attacked at night.<sup>91</sup> According to one African American veteran, “The sleeping bag is supposed to break, if you zip it up. But sometimes the zip freezes from your vapor that you exhale.”<sup>92</sup> Because the Chinese and North Korean forces attacked at night, they could “catch you in a sleeping bag” and kill you.<sup>93</sup> In other words, the sleeping bag could entrap soldiers, making it difficult for them to fight back. To solve that problem, some African American soldiers put their sleeping bags only up to their waists.<sup>94</sup> Using only half of the bag gave soldiers a chance to warm their lower body, while also giving them enough mobility to defend themselves if they were attacked. In response to these disadvantages, however, many soldiers avoided using their sleeping bags.

Due to the dilemma between staying warm and staying mobile enough to fight, soldiers like Morrow did not get much sleep while they were on the front lines. In the face of extremely low temperatures and inadequate shelter, they risked freezing to death if they fell asleep for too

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<sup>90</sup>Isaac Mercer, interviewed by Mark DePue. Personal Interview, Dixon, Illinois, December 29, 2010.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid.

<sup>92</sup>Ibid.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid.

long. Movement was key. As Morrow put it, “Everything is frozen, so you can’t stop moving. You’ll freeze. If you lay down and go to sleep, you’ll never wake up.”<sup>95</sup> One solution was teamwork. According to Morrow, “One guy [would be] asleep on a cat nap while the other one stay awake so you can wake him up.”<sup>96</sup> Additionally, soldiers sometimes learned how to sleepwalk. Morrow stated, “If you feel safe enough, you can put your hand on the guys in front of you and nod off.”<sup>97</sup> Nevertheless, nodding off while marching also came with risks. Soldiers who marched while drowsing could hardly pay attention to the enemy or their environment. A primary concern was slipping through the ice of a rice paddy and getting soaked.<sup>98</sup> According to Morrow, “If it’s not completely frozen, if you break through the ice of the rice paddy, of the water that was once there, you can get soaked. Then you’ll get frozen. You could freeze.”<sup>99</sup> Due to the cold weather and enemies that preferred to attack at night, Morrow and other African American soldiers tried to function on as little sleep as possible. Historiography’s tendency to overlook these issues leaves out an aspect of the African American experience during the Korean War that directly affected their combat experience.

Oral history testimonies reveal African American soldiers used a variety of methods to combat the frigid temperatures they were subjected to. Soldiers like James Lacy ensured they had dry socks to march in by taking them off and placing them in their armpits each night. Other soldiers like Curtis Morrow took naps as they marched with their fellow soldiers. In doing so,

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<sup>95</sup>Ibid.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid.

<sup>97</sup>Ibid.

<sup>98</sup>Ibid.

<sup>99</sup>Ibid.

they generated heat that kept them warm while also reenergizing themselves by getting some sleep. Finally, soldiers used their sleeping bags to cover their lower bodies. This method kept their lower torsos warm and simultaneously gave them enough mobility to defend themselves if attacked. These examples challenge historiography's narrow portrayal of African American soldiers' combat experiences by revealing the ingenuity they used to survive the cold weather.

Just as African American soldiers suffered from the cold weather conditions in Korea, white soldiers were also affected by the frigid temperatures. Men like Roy Aders described Korea as "colder than a well digger's behind."<sup>100</sup> Aders further indicated that it was, in fact, too cold to sleep.<sup>101</sup> Merle Jay Arnold, originally from Northern Iowa, grew up enjoying snow and cold weather but conceded that the conditions in Korea were the coldest he had ever experienced.<sup>102</sup> As a sniper, he was required to lay hidden in the snow and cold for days without access to shelter or an opportunity to warm up. Luckily, when Merle Arnold got to the Chosin Reservoir, he encountered a Marine Tank Division sergeant who turned on his tank and allowed Arnold to sleep on the hood of the vehicle to get warm.<sup>103</sup> So white and black soldiers were equally subjected to frigid temperatures in Korea.

Unlike black soldiers that were typically given inadequate clothing to fight the cold weather, however, some white soldiers were provided adequate clothing. Earnest Baker, Jr., for example, stated that he was given enough cold weather equipment to cope with frigid

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<sup>100</sup> Roy Aders. Interviewed by Brandon Joerendt. Personal Interview. November 26,

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Merle Jay Arnold. Interviewed by Alli Sommer. Personal Interview. November 1, 2006.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

conditions.<sup>104</sup> Baker indicated that the US military gave him heavy socks, a parka, and shoes, among other things, to combat the cold weather. Despite the equipment, Baker suggested that soldiers could still get frostbite if they did not change their socks regularly. The cold weather gear notwithstanding, some white soldiers still were adversely affected by the frigid conditions.

As a result of the cold weather, the ability of White soldiers to fight was impaired, just like Black soldiers. Robert Bey revealed that it would get as cold as 30 degrees below zero in Korea during the war.<sup>105</sup> One particular night, Bey recalled, he and other troops were ordered to climb hill 1282. Of the roughly 205 men in the group, only 34 of the men were not frostbitten or otherwise wounded.<sup>106</sup> Even though some White soldiers were given better equipment to deal with the cold weather, the frigid temperatures still impacted white soldiers' ability to carry out their duties as soldiers.

### **Consequences of Combat: African American Perspectives**

Just as cold weather is an overlooked experience that endangered the lives of African American soldiers, the combat experiences of African Americans is a topic that many believe they understand, even though they do not. Oral history testimonies provide a lens through which one can scrutinize the armed conflicts in which African American soldiers engaged. One consequence of combat generally overlooked by historiography is the psychological effects of combat. In particular, some African American soldiers describe becoming numb to the violence generated by constant combat.

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<sup>104</sup>Earnest Baker, Jr., interviewed by Robert Babcock. Personal Interview, Marietta, Georgia, 2003.

<sup>105</sup>Robert T. Bey, interviewed by Judith Kent. Personal Interview, Palm Coast, Florida, October 2, 2003.

<sup>106</sup>Ibid.

James Lacy's defense mechanism shaped his recollection of his participation in violent encounters with North Korean and Chinese soldiers. Lacy's description of the role he played in violent engagements with enemy combatants minimizes his role in the encounters that he participated in. When I asked Lacy if he had ever killed anybody during his tenure as a soldier, he said yes. Nonetheless, as a machine gunner, he stated that his captain, not he, set the setting on his machine gun. According to Lacy, "During the day they would fix it, so it [would] only go this far and this way. I couldn't go like this or like this. I could only go where they got it fixed. The captain had somebody to fix it."<sup>107</sup> In other words, Lacy's quote indicates the direction of where his machine gun could fire was set by his captain. When the North Koreans and Chinese attacked, Lacy's captain said, "OK, Lacy, give them a burst."<sup>108</sup> Upon that command, Lacy would climb on his jeep, grab his machine gun, and "have the guys get down in the hole, because I'm going to shoot over their heads. I would just shoot over their heads."<sup>109</sup> Lacy became proficient at killing enemy combatants, saving the lives of countless US soldiers. As we will see, however, he consistently found ways to avoid moral responsibility for taking the lives of the enemy.

One device Lacy employed for avoiding responsibility for killing was minimizing his role in killing enemy combatants. When Lacy was congratulated by fellow soldiers for his skill as a machine gunner, he would reply, "Yeah, well, Captain set the machine gun. He knew where they were. He had to set the machine gun and all I did was shoot over you all's head."<sup>110</sup> By

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<sup>107</sup>James Lacy, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Chicago, Illinois, January 20, 2015.

<sup>108</sup>Ibid.

<sup>109</sup>Ibid.

<sup>110</sup>Ibid.

emphasizing that the captain had set his machine gun, Lacy displaced some of the blame for the killing of enemy combatants from himself onto his commanding officer. When Lacy was asked, “Well, how many you kill last night?”<sup>111</sup> he would reply, “No, no, I don’t want to know.”<sup>112</sup> Lacy admitted, “I don’t want to know because I know that if I didn’t get this people coming this way, they would get these guys sitting in the hole there. I never did want to know.”<sup>113</sup> Lacy’s response is revealing. His decision not to find out how many men he had killed helped him separate himself from carrying out his duties as a machine gunner. Assigning responsibility to his captain and refusing to find out how many people he killed on the battlefield helped him continue to do his job.

The job of a soldier is to kill enemy combatants through the use of force.<sup>114</sup> Yet some violent encounters during the Korean War were more complicated than shooting North Korean and Chinese combatants on the battlefield. James Williams’ encounter with people he thought were enemy combatants serves as an example of the complexities of armed combat. While clearing out a small town with fellow soldiers, Williams and his fellow soldiers came upon a series of huts that they believed were filled with enemy soldiers. Hicks, a member of Williams’ group, used a flamethrower to set the huts on fire and flush out the occupants. According to Williams, “When he fired down there and hit that, it set all of them on fire. That is when they

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<sup>111</sup>Ibid.

<sup>112</sup>Ibid.

<sup>113</sup>Ibid.

<sup>114</sup>Richard Holmes, *Acts of War: The Behavior of Men in Battle* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), 31. According to Holmes, “the soldier’s primary function, the use—or threatened use—of force, sets him apart from civilians” (31).

started coming up out of there. Then I seen four coming up out of there.”<sup>115</sup> The four individuals Williams saw were women who appeared to be armed. Williams, standing behind his machine gun, opened fire, killing all four women. As Williams explained, “These folks [were coming] up out of there but they had weapons in their hands, like this, coming up out, so I cut them down.”<sup>116</sup> Because Williams could not distinguish whether or not the four women were enemy combatants, he made a split-second decision to kill them. Williams was court-martialed but later acquitted for shooting and killing the women.

Williams’s defensive response to killing four North Korean women during his oral history interview suggests that he developed a callousness for certain traumatic events that he participated in during the fog of war. Before Williams told his story of killing four North Korean women, he stated that a colonel told him to “kill every son of a bitch that jumps up in front of you because if you don’t kill him, he is damn sure going to kill you.”<sup>117</sup> Williams took those instructions to heart. Internalizing this order gave Williams the strength to make decisive decisions during battle, even if those split-second decisions took innocent lives. This draconian approach to war helped Williams stay alive while also potentially robbing him of his humanity. Therefore, a “kill-or-be-killed” mentality explains why Williams opened fire on the women who appeared to be carrying weapons and demonstrates how he was able to come to peace with that decision.

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<sup>115</sup>James Williams, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Chicago, Illinois, January 12, 2015.

<sup>116</sup>Ibid. James Williams’ commanding officer observed the bodies of the dead Koreans and determined that Williams was at fault. His commanding officer stated that he was under arrest, but Williams remained at the scene heavily armed. Williams was ultimately acquitted of any wrongdoing.

<sup>117</sup>Ibid.

Although Williams was decisive in the heat of the moment, his response to the news that he would be court-martialed reveals that he believed his actions were justified. When Williams' commanding officer confronted him, he stated, "I am not paying too much attention to what he is saying because I had just come out of a big firefight. We got everything cleared away down there and moved on up."<sup>118</sup> Once he considered the possibility of a court-martial; however, Williams became angry with his captain. Describing his reaction 60 years after the incident, Williams said, "Next firefight we get into, I am going to kill that son of a bitch."<sup>119</sup> Williams was infuriated at the possibility of punishment for an action he believed was justified. In his mind, he made the right call by eliminating targets that were a potential threat. His lack of emotion underscores the "kill-or-be-killed" ideology taught to him by an officer in the US military.

Not only do private memories expand the narrative of African American combatants' experiences in Korea, they also provide a clear, detailed picture of the fighting capabilities of North Korean and Chinese soldiers. By all accounts from veterans interviewed for this dissertation, North Korean and Chinese soldiers were formidable adversaries. Isaac Mercer, for example, stated that the enemy combatants that he encountered were "pretty vicious. They was tough."<sup>120</sup> Jesse Jenkins viewed North Korean and Chinese soldiers as "tremendous fighters."<sup>121</sup> Clarence Senor suggested that North Korean and Chinese soldiers were clever adversaries. Senor

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<sup>118</sup>Ibid.

<sup>119</sup>Ibid.

<sup>120</sup>Isaac Mercer, interviewed by Mark DePue. Personal Interview, Dixon, Illinois, December 29, 2010. James Lacy, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Chicago, Illinois, January 20, 2015. Lacy viewed Chinese fighters as fierce fighters that attacked American positions in large numbers. Lacy stated that his religion helped him cope with the massive attacks. At the request of other soldiers, he recited "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee" as bombs rained down on him and his fellow soldiers. Lacy and other soldiers chanted the Hail Mary prayer in unison until the bombing subsided.

<sup>121</sup>Jesse Jenkins, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Crown Point, Indiana, February 18, 2015.

recalls traveling on a boat in North Korea. He indicated that North Korean soldiers would try to hit US ships with a boat that was rigged with explosives.<sup>122</sup> If these boats made contact with American ships, they caused significant damage, killing men and destroying supplies.<sup>123</sup> Oral history testimonies such as these suggest African American soldiers respected North Korean and Chinese soldiers as effective fighters.

Some oral history testimonies indicate that African American soldiers not only respected North Korean and Chinese soldiers, but feared them, too. The atrocities perpetrated by North Korean and Chinese soldiers on US soldiers are frequently discussed within oral history testimonies. Roy Dell Johnson described enemy combatants as “crazy.”<sup>124</sup> Johnson stated that North Korean and Chinese soldiers waged psychological warfare against African American soldiers by mutilating some of the bodies of US soldiers. According to Johnson, who struggled to find a way to express the atrocity, “You could, you run up GS [general support] and, you know, men are dead and their testicles are in their mouths. So what I was saying is that—that—they—it worked on your brain, man, you know?”<sup>125</sup> The psychological warfare that North Korean and Chinese soldiers waged against African American soldiers had an impact on their ability to continue fighting.

External psychological warfare as waged by the enemy was, for many soldiers, met by internal moral quandaries. Indeed, a number of oral history testimonies underscore the moral

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<sup>122</sup>Clarence Senor, interviewed by Mark DePue. Springfield, Illinois, November 5, 2008.

<sup>123</sup>Ibid.

<sup>124</sup>Roy Dell Johnson, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Arlington, Texas, March 2, 2015. According to Johnson, “North Korean and Chinese soldiers had nice weapons and everything fine. And they had another, you know, platoons right here come some more with different kinds of weapons in. They came with sticks.”

<sup>125</sup>Ibid.

dilemmas African American soldiers struggled with on the battlefield. While James Williams' killing of four women he said were carrying guns highlights his ruthlessness during battle, his private memories of the Korean War offer a glimpse of his humanity. For example, Williams describes being stationed next to a river by a hill while on duty when he saw North Korean refugees "coming over that hill."<sup>126</sup> According to Williams, "It was like, maybe, 1,000 of them. If there was 1,000 of them, 300 to 400 of them would be Chinese in there."<sup>127</sup> The US Army could not allow the refugees to cross the river because of the possibility of enemy combatants hidden within the group. Therefore, Williams, along with other army personnel, "went down there, talked to them people, told them to go back, they couldn't come over. They said, 'OK.'"<sup>128</sup> A few minutes later, the Korean refugees again started to approach the US position. Williams and other army personnel again "went down there and talked to them again. Went back up there. When we got back up there this time, the captain told the platoon leaders to pass the word down then [if] they start moving again, fire for effect."<sup>129</sup> The captain's directive was simple—kill the Korean refugees if they came toward the line again. To Williams' relief, the refugees went back over the hill, defusing a potentially deadly situation.

While this encounter with North Korean refugees did not end in violence, the event did affect Williams emotionally. As he put it, "That was what got me. I had to kill all these people. I'll remember that until the day I die."<sup>130</sup> As Williams made this statement, he started to choke

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<sup>126</sup>James Williams, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal interview, Chicago, Illinois, January 12, 2015.

<sup>127</sup>Ibid.

<sup>128</sup>Ibid.

<sup>129</sup>Ibid. During the interview, James Williams' voice trembled.

<sup>130</sup>Ibid. This statement suggests that Williams did not want to face this issue.

up. He had faced a tough decision. If he was given an order to kill the North Korean refugees but refused, he would have risked getting court-martialed. If he had followed through with the order, he would most likely kill some innocent civilians and would have had to live with those emotions for the rest of his life. Later, Williams stated, “If you get the order to fire, you fire. I was going to fire. I was hoping the good Lord would kill me.”<sup>131</sup> After Williams said this, he had another emotional breakdown. These breakdowns reveal Williams’ humanity. For Williams, killing innocent civilians was a nearly unspeakable act. Yet, if given the order, he would have killed, even though it went against his values.

Other oral history testimonies highlight the humanity of African American soldiers through their treatment of prisoners of war (POWs). James Lacy relates an incident that took place on a battlefield in Korea. While in his jeep on a hill, he came across a North Korean soldier who wanted to surrender. Lacy jumped off his jeep and searched the soldier. According to Lacy, who accompanied his narrative with physical gestures, “After I assessed him, I got him out and tied his hands together like this, so he couldn’t run away.”<sup>132</sup> Once he had the POW in restraints, Lacy began looking after the man’s needs. Lacy stated, “I went to get my sack and found something with rice in it. I took it, opened it up, and I didn’t want to untie his hand, so I fed him. I fed him.”<sup>133</sup> Lacy also got his prisoner some water. The next morning Lacy went to Post Command and asked them, “What do you want me to do with the prisoner?”<sup>134</sup> Post Command

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<sup>131</sup>Ibid.

<sup>132</sup>James Lacy, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Chicago, Illinois, January 20, 2015.

<sup>133</sup>Ibid.

<sup>134</sup>Ibid.

told Lacy, “You captured him, go down that road and take him to the prison camp.”<sup>135</sup> Lacy proceeded to take his prisoner to the prison camp in a manner respectful of the man’s humanity.

While Lacy’s treatment of the POW showcased his compassion toward the man, some soldiers did not view his supervision of the North Korean favorably. As Lacy walked the POW to the prison camp, he ran into some fellow soldiers. As Lacy relates, one of them said, “‘Hey, put that gun on the guy.’ I said, ‘He’s no problem,’ like that.” Despite Lacy’s response, the soldiers took Lacy’s POW, put him on his knees and hit him in the back with the butt of a rifle.<sup>136</sup> Lacy said, “‘Hey, there is no use in all that, he’s not a problem’” and explained that he ‘had him half of the night.’<sup>137</sup> Lacy again stated, “He gave me no problems.”<sup>138</sup> Lacy’s testimony notwithstanding, the soldiers responded, “Hey but that’s just not the way you treat a prisoner. You supposed to be rough with him.”<sup>139</sup> Lacy said, “Not me, not me.”<sup>140</sup> Lacy refused to take part in the abuse and humiliation of this POW, but the experience affected him deeply.

The difference between Lacy’s treatment of the POW and that of his comrades underscores Lacy’s humanity. His description of how he treated the POW reveals his kindness, and the food and water that Lacy got for the prisoner illustrates his generosity. Lacy’s refusal to put a gun on the prisoner of war as he was escorting him highlights the bond forged between them. Finally, Lacy’s refusal to beat the POW, even though other soldiers claimed it was

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<sup>135</sup>Ibid.

<sup>136</sup>Ibid.

<sup>137</sup>Ibid.

<sup>138</sup>Ibid.

<sup>139</sup>Ibid.

<sup>140</sup>Ibid.

appropriate to do so, reveals his sense of fairness. Consequently, Lacy's story frames him as a responsible warrior. Even though he had the power to hurt his prisoner, he refused to do so. Personal stories like this can expand our understanding of what African American servicemen's experiences were like in Korea. New insights of African American soldiers gleaned from oral history testimonies reveal both the humanity and ruthlessness they were capable of during encounters they had with North Korean and Chinese soldiers.

### **Conclusion**

Private memories expand the historiography on African American soldiers in combat during the Korean War in a variety of ways. Although historiography reveals the inconsistencies in integrating African American soldiers, the historical narrative has several flaws. Historiography minimizes the importance of the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment's victory at Yechon and highlights African American soldiers respect for North Korean and Chinese soldiers. Oral history testimonies expand upon the African American experience by deepening and broadening their story of armed combat during the war. For example, historiography emphasizes how the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment fought at battles like Yechon but fails to chronicle the tensions that simmered beneath the surface between black and white soldiers while they were stationed in Korea, serving their country. In contrast, private memories reveal the carnage and bloodshed by African American soldiers at Yechon, while also highlighting the racial tensions that historiography fails to address. The racially motivated fights that some African American soldiers participated in and the resentment some African American soldiers felt about the quality of their equipment are indicative of ways in which historiography has occluded the discrimination African American soldiers faced.

Likewise, historiography fails to address in detail the impact weather had on their experiences during combat. Historians describe the frigid conditions African American soldiers faced during the Korean War, but overlook the failings of the US military in helping them survive the cold weather. Above all, historiography ignores the ways in which African American soldiers improvised to stay warm. In contrast, private memories address in a more nuanced manner how African American soldiers adjusted to the cold weather. Consequently, private memories reveal how African American soldiers survived the frigid temperatures of Korea in a way that highlights both the severity of the weather and the innovations those soldiers embraced to endure it.

Additionally, historiography explains the battles that African American soldiers engaged in with North Korean and Chinese soldiers, but it fails to examine how African American soldiers viewed these enemy combatants. Too often historiography focuses on battle strategy and chronicles the ways in which African American soldiers engaged with North Korean and Chinese soldiers tactically. With this narrow focus on tactics, historiography frequently ignores how African American soldiers evaluated North Korean and Chinese soldiers. Oral history testimonies reveal that they respected, admired, and, in some cases, feared North Korean and Chinese soldiers. Most importantly, these memories provide evidence and explanations for why African Americans felt the way they did about North Korean and Chinese soldiers.

Not only do private memories add further details to the African American experience that are not addressed in the historical narrative, but they also widen the scope of how African American soldiers are portrayed during the Korean War. The callousness a soldier displayed after killing four women in cold blood—having internalized the “kill or be killed” maxim—is

tempered by this same soldier's emotional breakdown after describing how he almost killed innocent civilians. These two private memories provide insight into the war's impact on soldiers. Above all, the situations that African American soldiers faced during armed conflicts elicited a variety of emotional responses within soldiers. Through their responses to these armed engagements, the full range of the human experience, from compassion to callousness, is put on display. Employing the archive of oral history testimony challenges the simplistic manner in which African American soldiers are portrayed within historiography and results in a chance to picture African American soldiers in all their complexity.

## CHAPTER 4

### IMPACT OF THE KOREAN WAR

“Don’t ever let anybody tell you any different. Once you go through something like that, you’re never the same. You’re never the same.”

—Isaac Mercer, interviewed by Marc DePue<sup>1</sup>

Isaac Mercer’s statement on the dramatic and undeniable consequences of war suggests the impact of the Korean War on African American soldiers. Indeed, in a variety of ways, the war changed those who served. Some were left with emotional scars from traumatic experiences they lived through during the war. Others experienced a change in their economic status—military service gave them access to jobs and training that would have otherwise been inaccessible. Thus, the Korean War became a double-edged sword for African American veterans. It gave some a key they used to unlock a bright future. Some African American soldiers found a career in the US military, while others gained a good education. With an education often paid for by the US government, some African American soldiers went on to have lucrative careers in education and business. Others used their experiences as a springboard for social activism. For others, the war continues to torment them. For this group of veterans, the war negatively impacted their mental health, their relationships with their families, and their outlook on political life. Oral history testimonies and autobiographies reflect the Korean War’s varied impact on African American soldiers: some report its devastation, while others describe it as empowering. The Korean War had an impact on African American soldiers’ professional careers, their interpersonal skills, and their emotional states. I argue that the Korean War’s impact on

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<sup>1</sup>Isaac Mercer, interviewed by Mark DePue. Personal Interview, Dixon, Illinois, December 29, 2010.

African American soldiers was significant as many were left with psychological scars, a new outlook on life and more job opportunities. Hence, private memories provide a comprehensive portrait of the war's effects on African American Korean War veterans and serves to humanize those African American soldiers who served during the Korean War.

In contrast, as we have seen throughout this project, the historical narrative's depiction of the impact the Korean War had on African American soldiers is minimal. In the few books that address the Korean War's influence on African American soldiers, the overriding, if reductive, theme is that the war created more opportunities for African Americans within the US military. According to *Black Yanks in the Pacific*, "Enlistment remained the most direct way to take advantage of militarization's opportunities."<sup>2</sup> In other words, enlisting in the US military gave African American soldiers job security. An African American veteran from South Carolina, for example, stated, "Being a sharecropper and a farmer, I had no other way of going in life."<sup>3</sup> He eventually served in the US military for two decades.<sup>4</sup> The historical narrative's portrayal of African American soldiers enlisting in the US military for financial gain is driven by historians claiming that African American soldiers were trapped in communities that provided no opportunity for economic or social mobility.

In keeping with the dominant narrative that military service offered a path to economic security, books such as *War: What Is It Good For?* reveal that an African American's choice to

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<sup>2</sup>Michael Green, *Black Yanks in the Pacific* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 137.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.* *Black Yanks in the Pacific* later uses statistics to support its claim that African American participation in the US armed forces went up after the Korean War. According to the book, "More than one in ten soldiers was black. The trend outlasted Vietnam and the draft; in 1984, 20 percent of those serving in the military were African Americans" (141-142). Other books, such as *The Double V* by Rawn James, suggest that African American enlistment after the Korean War went up significantly. According to James, roughly sixty years after Executive Order 9981, "one third of all senior enlisted personnel, 11 percent of officers, and 7 percent of generals and admirals" are African American (240).

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*

join the military during the Korean War was largely a pragmatic decision. After the war, many African American soldiers struggled to find work.<sup>5</sup> “This overwhelmingly young, male, and frequently underemployed population viewed the military as a means to earn regular wages, better their education, and acquire new job training and skills.”<sup>6</sup> *War: What Is It Good For?* suggests that some African Americans viewed the military as a way to enhance their quality of life by giving them access to education and employment. In contrast to historiography’s assertion that African American soldiers joined the US military to improve their socioeconomic status, private memories argue that a broader range of motivations were behind African American soldiers enlisting in the US military.

Not only does historiography fail to highlight the full complexity of why African American soldiers joined the US military, the historical narrative also does not illustrate the full impact the Korean War had on African American soldiers. The historical narrative’s focus on enlistment rates among African Americans does not uncover the reasons a significant number of African American soldiers signed up for the US military during the Korean War era. Historians also fail to address the war’s emotional impact or the war’s effects on the families of African American Korean War soldiers. Moreover, historiography overlooks the educational and employment opportunities afforded to African American soldiers after they served in the Korean War. Finally, historiography effectively ignores the impact the Korean War had on African Americans’ philosophy toward the war. As a result, the historical narrative provides an

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<sup>5</sup>Kimberley Phillips, *War: What Is It Good For?* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 151.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid. Books such as Richard Stillman’s *Integration of the Negro in the U.S. Armed Forces* indicate that working for the US military was a good job for many African American soldiers. For example, Army Sergeant First Class John Lawrence stated, “A lot of us Negroes never had it so good. A corporal can make \$1,000 by re-enlisting, buy a car and live big. The young Negro in uniform feels big in it. It shows he’s an American and that he’s as good as anyone else” (57-48).

incomplete picture of how the Korean War influenced African American soldiers. Hence, historiography can be improved by highlighting the war's impact on African American soldiers' socioeconomic status and by emphasizing the emotional trauma African American soldiers and their families experienced as a result of the war.

The emotional impact of the war on those who survived cannot be overstated. Most soldiers lost friends and comrades in combat, and many almost lost their lives. For many African American veterans interviewed for this project, the psychological impact of the war manifested itself in their dreams. For example, James Lacy's private memories indicate that his dreams helped him reconnect, in a way, with some of his comrades who were killed during the Korean War. As Lacy put it, "I still have dreams, and I still fight. I still fight."<sup>7</sup> Lacy stated that in one dream he saw a big, long wall that paralleled a street that he was walking along.<sup>8</sup> As he walked down the street, he heard a voice say, "Hey Jimmy! Jimmy!"<sup>9</sup> He looked over at the wall and heard the same voice say, "Over here, Jimmy."<sup>10</sup> When he went over to the wall, he spotted all his old friends who were killed in the Korean War, including one friend in particular, Rusty Lewis.<sup>11</sup> In his dream, Lacy said to Rusty, "I thought you guys got killed."<sup>12</sup> Rusty responded, "No. What we did, they took us and put us in this wall. We play basketball; we play football."<sup>13</sup> The deceased soldier added, "We climb up on the fields." Lacy continued, "And he says, 'See

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<sup>7</sup>James Lacy, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview. Chicago, Illinois, January 20, 2015.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

Sergeant Don on the end?’ I say, ‘Yeah.’ He says, ‘He’s going to call us and tell us OK.’”<sup>14</sup>

Lacy’s dream reveals the psychological impact the Korean War had on his psyche: more than fifty years after the conflict, Lacy continues to mourn the loss of his friends, strives to remember them as having fun by playing football and basketball together, and wishes to reconnect with them.

Not all African American Korean War veterans had dreams that helped them frame their lost friends from the war in a positive light. Some African American soldiers, in fact, had dreams that tormented them. Lt. Col. Charles Bussey’s dreams evoked strong emotions that frightened him. According to Bussey, “At night I went back to the killing floor, and it was ugly, very ugly.”<sup>15</sup> When he lay on his back, he dreamed of Chinese soldiers running over his shallow grave.<sup>16</sup> These soldiers bruised his ribs, and their feet stuffed sand in his nose, making it difficult for him to breath.<sup>17</sup> During these dreams, Bussey would turn over in his sleep and cover his face. He would often sweat through his bedclothes and cry out in fear.<sup>18</sup> As a result of these dreams, he could often sleep for only three and four hours at a time.<sup>19</sup> For Bussey, his dreams revealed the depth of the war’s psychological impact on him as they forced him to relive the horrors of war each night.

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Charles Bussey, *Firefight at Yechon: Courage and Racism in the Korean War* (Washington, DC: Macmillan Publishing, 1991), 259-260.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

Many of us are familiar with veterans who experience nightmares, but oral history testimonies highlight a far subtler effect of the war. For some African American soldiers, the war's impact is revealed not only in their dreams but also in their response to various types of weather conditions. James Williams, for example, did not like it when it was snowing because it reminded him of his experiences in combat in Korea.<sup>20</sup> Rainy, stormy weather conditions also had an adverse effect on Williams. Inclement weather reminded him of his first night in Korea, when there was "a firefight way off, way off in the mountains. You could see the little things, looked like a firefly, you know what I mean?"<sup>21</sup> When Williams asked a fellow soldier what they were seeing, someone told him, "There's a firefight going on down there."<sup>22</sup> Williams then heard rumbling and saw flashes and surmised that it was about to rain. However, he was wrong. It was not thunder and lightning, but artillery shells going off.<sup>23</sup> As Williams witnessed this nighttime firefight, he was told, "You'll get used to that; you won't pay it no mind."<sup>24</sup> Williams, unfortunately, never got used to the sounds of war. These visual and auditory representations of war would affect him for many years to come, as Williams reported continuing to react negatively to precipitation and loud weather conditions.

Hearing the rumbles and blasts and seeing flashes of light of combat in the Korean War left a deep scar on Williams's psyche. He consequently became sensitive to thunderstorms and

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<sup>20</sup>James Williams, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Chicago, Illinois, January 12, 2015.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

was eventually diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder.<sup>25</sup> Williams described an incident where a natural weather pattern entirely overwhelmed his senses. Williams described an average Sunday evening when he was having a drink at home with his girlfriend when it started to rain.<sup>26</sup> While it was still just raining, he converted the couch to a bed and went to sleep. However, when it started thundering and lightning, Williams rolled off the couch and stayed on the floor for ten to fifteen minutes.<sup>27</sup> Williams's girlfriend started laughing at him, prompting him to ask, "What's so damn funny?"<sup>28</sup> She said, "The way you was carrying on. I thought you was fighting the war over again."<sup>29</sup> He responded, "I was, and it ain't funny either."<sup>30</sup> Hence, for Williams, as for other veterans, the sights and sounds reminiscent of war could haunt some veterans for decades. Even something as quotidian as weather conditions had the ability to trigger emotional breakdowns that would transport soldiers such as Williams back to the battlefields of Korea.

The emotional trauma that soldiers, such as Williams, faced when they returned to the United States required medical attention. While historiography ignores this aspect of the African American experience during the Korean War, oral history testimonies discuss the various ways in which the US military treated the emotional trauma soldiers faced after the war. When Roy

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid. Curtis Morrow, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Chicago, Illinois, January 7, 2015. Morrow, who suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, indicated in his interview that the term was not used during the Korean War to describe his psychological issues from combat. Instead, he suggested the doctors called what he suffered from "battle fatigue." Morrow later revealed in his oral history testimony that he believes the average soldier suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder, but most do not talk about it because "things can be taken out of context." Morrow added that a soldier willing to discuss his experience would most likely disclose his experiences to other soldiers because they would be the only listeners able to relate.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

Dell Johnson was discharged from the US military, he was “locked down for five months.”<sup>31</sup>

After the war, Johnson would sit mute and stare off into space.<sup>32</sup> Johnson was eventually diagnosed with schizophrenia.<sup>33</sup> To treat his condition, he was administered electric shock, insulin, and hydrotherapy. For electric shock therapy, electrodes were attached to his head while two men held his torso and two other men held his legs. Then a doctor held his head back, put a mouthpiece on him, and proceeded to shock him. Fortunately, the insulin and hydrotherapy Johnson received were less traumatic. He was given insulin that made him go to sleep, and then later given glucose that brought him back to consciousness.<sup>34</sup> Hydrotherapy consisted of a man “with a big hose like a fire hydrant that shot cold water” on him.<sup>35</sup> Johnson’s private memory exposes the peculiar ways the US military attempted to treat soldiers who suffered from emotional trauma.

Electric shock, insulin therapy, hydrotherapy, and counseling are all methods highlighted in oral history testimonies as methods the US military used to treat African American soldiers. The regular references in oral history testimonies—and their virtual absence in historiography—to these techniques show that the US military went to great lengths to help African American soldiers overcome their emotional wounds. Hence, oral history testimonies’ coverage of the US military’s desire to solve the emotional issues of African American Korean War veterans reveals another gap in the historical narrative. Historiography’s omission of the medical treatment

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<sup>31</sup>Roy Dell Johnson, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Arlington, Texas, March 2, 2015.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

African American soldiers received for their psychological wounds indicates that historians have opted to portray them in a way that does not take into account the long-term effects of the Korean War on African American soldiers.

Unfortunately for many African American soldiers, the emotional impact of the Korean War was not limited to their own psyches. Some oral history testimonies illustrate the various ways in which the war influenced their family lives as well. Colonel Bussey, for example, had trouble connecting with his daughter when he got back from the war. When he got back, his daughter, who was eight months old when he left for the war, did not initially recognize him. As he put it, “She referred to me as ‘that man,’ but time took care of that.”<sup>36</sup> Eventually, Bussey’s daughter began to recognize him, and he was able to reestablish a meaningful relationship with her.

War not only had an effect on some soldiers’ relationships with their children, but it also damaged some soldiers’ relationships with their wives. When Bussey got back to the States, he desired to be back fighting in the Korean War.<sup>37</sup> As he put it, “I identified more with being out there, where my problems, whatever they were, were mine alone and disturbed no one else.”<sup>38</sup> Although he made it back alive from the war, his mind was still trapped in the violence and blood that colored his experiences, and he struggled to adapt to civilian life.<sup>39</sup> One issue Bussey identified was his need for someone to listen to the atrocities that he took part in and witnessed. He thought his wife would be the ideal candidate for this role, but she was unwilling or unable to listen to him. “My wife couldn’t deal with the blood and gore that haunted me. She wanted to

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<sup>36</sup>Bussey, *Firefight at Yechon*, 259.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 260.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

hear nothing of killing, maiming, frostbite, barbed wire, fear, trembling, doubt, arson, exhaustion, death, or blood—none of it,” Bussey reflected.<sup>40</sup> Consequently, the Korean War put a strain on Bussey’s marriage because his wife could not accommodate the emotional needs of her husband, and he could not find another outlet to express himself.

The emotional damage the Korean War had on African American soldiers’ families is also reflected in James Lacy’s oral history testimony. When Lacy got back from the Korean War, he tried to reestablish stability in his life. He got married and had three children.<sup>41</sup> Despite this, Lacy was unable to put his Korean War experiences behind him. Like Bussey, Lacy attempted to talk to his wife about his wartime experiences. As in Bussey’s situation, Lacy’s wife refused to listen to him. Lacy’s inability to connect with his wife about his wartime experiences strained his marriage. Personal narratives help draw attention to the ways in which the wives of some African American soldiers were ill-equipped to help their husbands overcome the emotional trauma of military service. Although historiography elides this point, the war impacted both veterans and their families, putting strains on marriages and distance between fathers and their children.

Like it did to some African American soldiers, the Korean War strained some white soldiers’ marriages. When Gene Bleuer attempted to tell his wife about his wartime experiences, she did not want to listen to him. As he put it, “She didn’t want any part of it.”<sup>42</sup> Bleuer’s wife would tell him, “We’ve heard all about World War II. We don’t need to listen to that other stuff.”<sup>43</sup> Bleuer’s wife ultimately got a divorce from him because she had difficulty

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>James Lacy, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Chicago, Illinois, January 20, 2015.

<sup>42</sup>Gene Bleuer, interviewed by Mark DePue. Personal Interview, Springfield, Illinois, December 18, 2007.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

comprehending his wartime experiences. So, oral history testimonies highlight how the spouses of some African American and white soldiers struggled to relate to the emotional trauma their husbands suffered from as a result of the war.

Although the Korean War negatively affected aspects of some African American soldiers' lives, life after war was not all challenge, struggle, and conflict. As a result of their participation in the Korean War, access to education became readily available for many African American soldiers. For many African American veterans, access to more educational opportunities minimized the impact structural racism had on their ability to secure economic independence. Porche Taylor, for example, earned three degrees—a BS, MS, and PhD—all paid for by the US military.<sup>44</sup> Harold Brown received his PhD from The Ohio State University, also paid for by the military. As Brown explained, “When I finished my last hour of my last dissertation with my PhD is when I ran exactly out of money. I used every dime.”<sup>45</sup> Eugene Lloyd similarly took advantage of the G.I. Bill, which paid for his college degree from Tennessee State University.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, Lawrence Curtin, a white Korean War veteran, was able to go to agricultural school in his county as a result of his service in the US military during the Korean War.<sup>47</sup> Jim Stone, a white Korean War veteran, went to Milken University on the G.I. Bill.<sup>48</sup> Hence, African American soldiers and white soldiers took advantage of the G.I. Bill to get free education.

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<sup>44</sup>Porche Taylor, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Richmond, Virginia, December 22, 2014.

<sup>45</sup>Harold Brown, interviewed by Rebecca Wiggenhorn. Personal Interview, Beavercreek, Ohio, May 15, 2010.

<sup>46</sup>Eugene Lloyd, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Chicago, Illinois, February 13, 2015.

<sup>47</sup>Lawrence Curtin, interviewed by Mark DePue. Personal Interview, Springfield, Illinois, March 14, 2012.

<sup>48</sup>Jim Stone, interviewed by Mark DePue. Personal Interview, Springfield, Illinois, May 21, 2008.

Soldiers who were wounded in battle had access to monies that paid for their education. Some veterans, such as Roy Dell Johnson, a Korean War veteran who was wounded several times, took advantage of the rehabilitation program to get an education. According to Johnson, “I didn’t have to pay for anything, like if I needed a computer, we didn’t have computers then, but if I needed one, I could get one.”<sup>49</sup> Oral history testimonies indicate African American Korean War veterans took advantage of various programs offered by the US military to get a free or subsidized education.

Along with African American Korean War veterans getting access to a free education, veterans from the war received more job opportunities. Some soldiers, for example, stayed in the military and moved up the ranks to greater respect, a larger paycheck, guaranteed health care, and a secure retirement. According to Taylor, “You do something to get decorated. You spend your time in. It comes.”<sup>50</sup> In other words, Taylor suggests that the longer a soldier stayed in the army, the more likely he or she would move up the ranks. In Taylor’s particular case, he served during World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War and quickly moved up the ranks. In the end, Taylor retired as a full colonel in the US Army.

However, the economic benefits of military service during the Korean War were not limited to those soldiers willing to become “lifers.” Although some African American soldiers made a career of the US military, others became teachers in the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC).<sup>51</sup> When John Thomas got out of the service, he went to teach ROTC at Fort Knox.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>Roy Dell Johnson, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Arlington, Texas, March 2, 2015.

<sup>50</sup>Porche Taylor, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Richmond, Virginia, December 22, 2014.

<sup>51</sup>John Thomas, interviewed by Brianna Brooks. Personal Interview, Indianapolis, Indiana, October 4, 2009. ROTC is a college program that prepares students to become commissioned officers, while active duty within the US armed forces means that a person is currently serving in the US military.

From there, he went on to work in ROTC at Attucks High School in 1978 and finally finished his career teaching ROTC at Arlington High School in 1995.<sup>53</sup> In total, Thomas served in the military for twenty-eight years and taught for an additional twenty years. Other veterans found work at jobs that were earmarked specifically for veterans. Jesse Jenkins, for instance, worked as a molder in a foundry.<sup>54</sup> He then worked for thirty-seven years in the Veterans Administration as a food service worker and a butcher.<sup>55</sup> Finally, he was a chief of building management service at LA's Service Cargo.<sup>56</sup> In each of these roles, Jenkins got the job based, at least in part, on his veteran status.<sup>57</sup>

Along with historiography failing to highlight how the US military helped many African American soldiers find employment, the historical narrative has omitted other key ways in which the Korean War had an impact on African American soldiers. For instance, private memories reveal that the Korean War injected into some African American soldiers a sense of social consciousness. When some African American soldiers arrived home, their outlook on life changed. Following service in a technically desegregated military, they came home to a country that was still segregated. African American soldiers were still required to ride in the back of buses, drink from separate water fountains, and send their children to segregated schools. As a result, some African American soldiers were angry that they had served their country honorably

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid.

<sup>54</sup>Jesse Jenkins, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Crown Point, Indiana, February 18, 2015.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid.

but were still treated poorly. Consequently, some soldiers sought ways to exercise greater agency against injustices like Jim Crow.

While Curtis Morrow's desire to fight for social justice issues was heightened after the Korean War, the nonviolent strand within the Civil Rights Movement viewed his participation in the movement as a liability, not an asset. When Curtis Morrow came home, he became disillusioned with the United States. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other civil rights leaders were endorsing a nonviolent approach to combating racial injustice. Morrow questioned King's tactics. As Morrow put it, "Nonviolence? Is he kidding? We thought it was a trap set, a booby trap or something, leading people in, trying to ambush."<sup>58</sup> The Civil Rights Movement, according to Morrow, did not want African American veterans from the Korean War. "No soldier, especially a combat soldier, would be invited to participate in the march in Selma," he claimed.<sup>59</sup> African American soldiers were viewed as a liability to the Civil Rights Movement. Because they were trained to respond to violence with violence, Morrow believed the Civil Rights Movement thought leaving African American soldiers out of nonviolent protests—which could easily turn violent at the hands of white police or anti-civil rights activists—was the best course of action.

Curtis Morrow became more aware of the struggle for freedom waged by people of color during his time in Korea.<sup>60</sup> According to Morrow, while he was stationed in Japan, he had a conversation with a fellow soldier about Africans in Libya fighting for their independence from British rule.<sup>61</sup> The conversation left an impression on Morrow. When he got back to the States

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<sup>58</sup>Curtis Morrow, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Chicago, Illinois, January 7, 2015.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid.

after his deployment, Morrow had two conversations with two men that left a lasting impression on him. Morrow befriended Minister Louis Farrakhan, the leader of the Nation of Islam, then and now, while he was exploring his relationship with the Civil Rights Movement. Morrow credits Farrakhan for inspiring his social awakening. According to Morrow, Farrakhan was “a smart, good dude. Great brother, man, and so in the evenings, we would sit around and talk about our situation, the world situation.”<sup>62</sup> Through his conversations with Farrakhan, Morrow’s political consciousness was being solidified.

Along with his discussions with Minister Louis Farrakhan, Morrow’s conversations with a fellow classmate at the American Academy of Art inspired him to fight social injustice in Africa. When he was enrolled as an art student at the American Academy of Art, he met a man named Walter who told him that Kwame Nkrumah, a revolutionary in Ghana, was looking for African Americans to help rebuild Africa, and Morrow signed up.<sup>63</sup> Leaving school, he joined the movement to overthrow the British government in Ghana and lived in Ghana for over ten years.<sup>64</sup> Hence, the war inspired some African Americans to engage actively in social justice issues or go so far as to participate in revolutionary movements, as Morrow did.

While the war did not transform every African American Korean War soldier into a revolutionary, the Korean War did leave a lasting impression on how they interacted with other people. The war helped some learn how to negotiate with others. William Anderson’s experiences during the Korean War taught him how to live with other people. As Anderson put it, “Like I told you, all these nuts I used to be with—well, one time this nut may be the guy that

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<sup>61</sup>Ibid.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid.

keeps you—that saves your life, so you learn to live with people. You learn to get along with people.”<sup>65</sup> Thus, the experiences of some US soldiers during the war helped them gain the ability to be more accepting of others. Ironically, some African American soldiers became less confrontational and more amicable toward others as a result of the war.

Not only did the Korean War help some African American soldiers become more tolerant of others, the war also helped some of them in their personal lives and others in their professional careers. For some soldiers such as A. J. Nero, the war made them more mature.<sup>66</sup> As he put it, “I had grown up a couple of years” as a result of the war.<sup>67</sup> Some African American Korean War veterans, including Jeanne Beasley, suggested that they became more active after the war. According to Beasley, “I think I’ve much more stamina.”<sup>68</sup> In fact, other women at her job at a hospital would ask her to do extra tasks because they viewed her as having more energy than they did. Thus, one overlooked effect of the Korean War was that it made some African American veterans of the war more responsible and enthusiastic workers.

Like with some African American soldiers, the Korean War also helped some white soldiers become more mature by giving them a new appreciation for life. When Lawrence Curtin got back to the United States, he “thought no one that lived in the United States of America should ever complain about anything, after being in Korea for nine months, eight months, I

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<sup>65</sup>William Anderson, Jr., interviewed by Mary Brandes. Personal Interview, Madison, Wisconsin, August 27, 2009.

<sup>66</sup>A. J. Nero, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Chicago, Illinois, November 14, 2014.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid.

<sup>68</sup>Jeanne Beasley, interviewed by William Browne. Personal Interview, National Harbor, Maryland, August 7, 2009.

guess. It was time to grow up.”<sup>69</sup> After witnessing the living conditions of Koreans in Korea, Curtin realized that Americans had privileges others throughout the world did not have. Robert Berry also had a change in his outlook as a result of his participation in the Korean War. According to Berry, the Korean War “taught me one thing, to value life, day and day out.”<sup>70</sup> To Berry, life should be cherished and not taken for granted. As Berry put it, “You don’t look forward to what’s going to happen twelve years from now, fifteen years from now, thirty years from now; you look for today, and you make each day count.”<sup>71</sup> The Korean War altered both African American and white soldiers’ outlooks on life.

Although the Korean War made some African American veterans better collaborators and more adaptive and energetic in the workplace, others reported becoming cynical about people as a result of the war. For example, Clarence Senor believed the war made him mistrust people. As Senor put it, “My wife says, ‘You don’t like anybody, do you?’ I said, ‘No. What I don’t like is what people say and what people do.’”<sup>72</sup> When Senor was questioned further about this point, he clarified, “I don’t try to judge them. They judge themselves.”<sup>73</sup> In other words, Senor validated his criticism of others by suggesting their poor behavior spoke for itself. The Korean War had made Senor skeptical of people and their intentions.

Not only did the war make some African American veterans more cynical toward people, but the social consciousness that they got from the war made some of them suspicious of the concept of war. For example, Harold Brown believed that the US government was intervening in

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<sup>69</sup>Lawrence Curtin, interviewed by Mark DePue. Personal Interview, Springfield, Illinois, March 14, 2012.

<sup>70</sup>Robert Berry, interviewed by Mark DePue. Personal Interview, Springfield, Illinois, September 12, 2007.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid.

<sup>72</sup>Clarence Senor, interviewed by Mark DePue. Personal Interview, Springfield, Illinois, November 5, 2008.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid.

wars that the country should not be involved in.<sup>74</sup> While Brown did concede that the US government needed a strong military, he also indicated in his oral history testimony that the country should initially use diplomacy before resorting to war.<sup>75</sup> Brown's belief that the United States should exhaust diplomacy before resorting to war is similar to Homer Franklin's pacifist position on war. According to Franklin, the Korean War "gave me a long-standing, I guess, sense of awareness and concern about the futility of war, particularly that war."<sup>76</sup> Franklin added that he believed none of the goals of the Korean War aligned with the interests of the people of the United States. He could not "see any real value to the people of this country from the war."<sup>77</sup> Hence, Homer Franklin's distaste for war was a direct result of his participation in the Korean War. His inability to see how the Korean War benefited US citizens made him conclude that war as a general principle was a waste of time, energy, and money. Brown and Franklin's experiences in the Korean War gave both of them insight into the futility and wastefulness of war.

Private memories provide a more in-depth view of the impact of the Korean War on African American soldiers than historiography does. At one extreme, private memories emphasize how the war affected African American soldiers' conceptions of war itself. The war left some African American soldiers emotionally damaged and, for some, adversely affected their marriages. Historiography, on the other hand, merely covers how the war increased the

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<sup>74</sup>Harold Brown, interviewed by Rebecca Wiggenghorn. Personal Interview, Beavercreek, Ohio, May 15, 2010.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid.

<sup>76</sup>Homer Franklin, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Chicago, Illinois, November 28, 2014.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid.

number of African Americans who signed up for the US armed forces. Therefore, the historical narrative's depiction of the effects the Korean War had on African American soldiers is simplistic, offering only a small window through which to view the war's impact on those soldiers.

Perhaps most importantly, oral history testimonies and autobiographies undo the reductionism of historiography by humanizing African American soldiers. Oral history testimonies force us to take into account the emotional impact the war had on African American soldiers and their families. The nightmares of some soldiers following their service to their country remind us of the stakes of war. Emotional outbursts to seemingly quotidian events uncover how the Korean War affected the psyche of some African American soldiers. Further, private memories reveal how the Korean War affected the families of African American soldiers. Indeed, many veterans benefited from service in the war, a trajectory widely overlooked by historiography. Historiography fails to explain how African Americans' access to the G.I. Bill and other programs gave them a free education, which opened up more opportunities for them later in life. In contrast, private memories reveal the extent to which the Korean War empowered African American soldiers to move up the socioeconomic ladder. The historical narrative glosses over or ignores all these facets of the human experience of war. When we use private memories to expose the effects the Korean War had on some African American soldiers, we gain a deeper awareness of the consequences—both positive and negative—on the men and women who served.

It is hard to overstate the effects of the Korean War, itself a footnote in the annals of American military history, on African American soldiers. For some soldiers, the war uplifted and empowered; for others, it crippled and demoralized. On the one hand, it helped some secure jobs

and get degrees. On the other hand, the war left emotional scars that remain with many to this day. Historiography's failure to comprehensively address the many ways in which the war impacted African American soldiers means that an important chapter in the story of African American soldiers within the US military has been left out. As historians, we owe it to veterans to attend to the stories they tell about their military service. In the case of veterans of the Forgotten War, listening to the voices of these even more forgotten soldiers can help ensure future generations have a better chance at understanding war in all its complexity. African American soldiers were marginalized in the 1950s; it is far past time to respect their sacrifice and make these forgotten soldiers of the Forgotten War an equal player in mainstream historiography.

## CONCLUSION

Historians have largely ignored the contributions African American soldiers made to the Korean War, regularly devoting just a few paragraphs to their experiences in book-length studies of the conflict. This oversight has resulted in historiography that fails to adequately portray African American soldiers' Korean War experiences. *Forgotten Soldiers from a Forgotten War: Oral Histories of African American Soldiers from the Korean War* seeks to reveal the inadequate nature of the historiography of African American soldiers and the incomplete account of their contributions to war that has been presented to American citizens and to the US military community. By comparing oral history testimonies with historiography on this topic, I show how private memories provide a deeper, more intimate account of African American soldiers who served in the US military and suggest new avenues for exploration in the historiography of the Korean War. Oral history testimonies reveal that African American soldiers joined the US military for a variety of different reasons. They also highlight that African Americans were adequately trained for combat. And, they indicate that African American soldiers served their country with honor. Consequently, oral history testimonies uncover details of the African American experience that have been overlooked by historiography and, in doing so, reframe how African American soldiers are perceived within the historical narrative.

Oral history testimonies offer insights into African American soldiers' experiences during the Korean War that have been left out of the historical narrative. For example, private memories reveal that African American soldiers joined the US military to escape poverty, to support their country in an armed conflict, and to secure their independence from their families. In addition to

revealing why African American soldiers enlisted in the US armed forces, private memories also prove that African American soldiers were well-trained for combat by revealing the drills they participated in and the specialized training they received during basic training. So, private memories contrast historiography's claim that African American soldiers were ill-prepared to fight against North Korean and Chinese soldiers. Oral history testimonies also demonstrate that segregation within the US military was still being enforced during the Korean War. Moreover, private memories show how institutional racism was still interwoven into the fabric of the US military during the Korean War era despite President Truman issuing Executive Order 9981 in 1948 that desegregated the US military. Consequently, oral history testimonies nuance the African American experience during the Korean War in a way that provides a more complete portrait of their wartime experiences.

Unlike historiography that overlooks the role of poverty as motivation for African Americans joining the US military, private memories reveal some of them enlisted in the US armed forces to escape financial hardship. In fact, African American soldiers joined the US military for the sake of survival. During the 1930s and 1940s, the majority of African American families lived in poverty. As a result of their socioeconomic status, their health-care options were poor and their food quality low and they were exposed to high levels of crime and violence. Therefore, joining the US military provided a refuge from poverty-related issues for some African Americans.

Not only did the military help some African American men and women escape poverty, it also helped some of them escape racism. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, African Americans were still subject to high levels of prejudice and discrimination. Oral history testimony reveals that some African American soldiers signed up for the US military so that they would not go to

jail when faced with exaggerated or falsified criminal charges. Therefore, some soldiers enlisted as a means of getting out of the poor communities where they lived and where structural racism informed every facet of daily life.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, reasons for enlistment were not limited to the self-serving. In addition to using enlistment in the US armed forces to get away from their communities, others enlisted because they felt a patriotic duty to protect the United States. Colonel Porche Taylor, for instance, joined the US military after he heard over the radio that the United States had been attacked by Japan. Other African Americans joined the US military because they believed their skills could help the United States win the Korean War. Their oral history testimonies reveal that some African American soldiers had a deep commitment to their country. Hence, whereas historiography fails to adequately address the rationale for why African American soldiers enlisted in the US military, private memories highlight a range of different reasons those individuals joined up.

Not only do private memories reveal why African American soldiers enlisted in the US military, but oral history testimonies also emphasize the racism they experienced during basic training and during the Korean War. Curtis Morrow's account of the physical altercations he faced during basic training as a result of his race highlights this point. Oral histories further illustrate how segregation was still in effect at the outset of the Korean War despite historiographies suggesting otherwise. Many African American soldiers, for example, trained only with other African Americans at the beginning of the war. Likewise, private memories highlight how integration was implemented within certain branches of the US military immediately, while segregation was still enforced in other branches. Even though historiography

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<sup>1</sup>Curtis Morrow, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Chicago, Illinois, January 7, 2015.

does cover some of these issues, it fails to stress the nuances of Jim Crow and how integration shaped the Korean War experience for African American soldiers.

Just as oral history testimonies indicate how institutionalized racism played a role in the experiences of African American soldiers during the Korean War, private memoirs also emphasize details of African American soldiers' basic training experiences that are not addressed within historiography. The historical narrative highlights the training African American soldiers received and how they entertained themselves. Yet, historiography omits details on African American soldiers receiving extensive weapons training during basic training. Historiography also provides only a cursory overview of the exercises and drills African American soldiers went through during basic training. Oral history testimonies, on the other hand, provide more intimate details, such as the types of exercises they were required to do during basic training. Also, private memories highlight the specialized training some African American soldiers received, including information on how to set up communications lines and how to create clean drinking water for the troops. Oral history testimonies offer a more thorough account of how training prepared African American soldiers juxtaposed to the historical narrative's account of the African American experience during basic training. In doing so, oral history testimonies reveal that African American soldiers were trained well and, therefore, ready to fight effectively against North Korean and Chinese soldiers.

In addition to oral history testimonies providing a detailed account of African American soldiers' experiences during basic training, private memories also uncover aspects of their combat experiences that are not addressed within historiography. Some historical accounts of the war suggest that African American soldiers did not meet the expectations of the US military. Oral history testimonies respond to historiography on the subject matter by giving evidence that

African American soldiers were reliable and brave during combat. Private memories indicate that some soldiers sustained concussions, while others were wounded multiple times. Oral history testimonies also reveal that African American soldiers were heroes, saving dozens of their comrades' lives through valiant actions on the battlefield. Thus, private memories of African American soldiers who fought in the Korean War challenge the historiography that suggests African American soldiers in segregated units were cowardly, poorly disciplined, and unreliable.

The numerous awards for valor that many African American soldiers earned reveal that many African American soldiers served their country with distinction. Oral history testimonies from Curtis Morrow, a recipient of the Purple Heart; Roy Dell Johnson, the recipient of three Purple Hearts; A. J. Nero, a recipient of the Purple Heart; and Colonel Porche Taylor, a recipient of the Silver Star, suggest African American soldiers were highly decorated for their military contributions. Within a group of eleven African American Korean War veterans randomly selected to be interviewed for this dissertation, the medals four interviewees earned indicates that more than a few African American soldiers served with distinction during the Korean War era. Consequently, with almost half of all the interviewees receiving prestigious medals, this percentage suggests many African American soldiers risked their lives for the United States during the Korean War.

Along with the awards that soldiers such as Morrow, Johnson, Nero, and Taylor earned, primary source accounts also support the argument that many African American soldiers fought bravely during the Korean War. Morrow's ability to anticipate enemy ambushes by picking up the smell of North Korean soldiers highlights his intuitiveness as a battle-seasoned warrior.<sup>2</sup> James Lacy's ability to fix a machine gun while Chinese and North Korean soldiers converged

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

on his unit's position highlights his strength under pressure.<sup>3</sup> The bullet and shrapnel wounds that Johnson received indicate the sacrifices he made for his country.<sup>4</sup> All these oral history testimonies effectively refute the claim that African American soldiers, especially African American soldiers from the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Regiment, were poor soldiers. Above all, these private memories reveal that African American soldiers served their nation as honorably as white soldiers did during the Korean War.

Oral history testimonies reveal that African American and white soldiers both served the United States courageously during the Korean War. Private memories indicate that African American and white soldiers either were drafted into the US military, or they enlisted to get money. Additionally, oral history testimonies highlight how they both had similar basic training experiences. African American soldiers and white soldiers went through physical and mental conditioning to prepare for war. Oral history testimonies also reveal that both African American and white soldiers experienced emotional stress from the war. The oral history testimonies also reveal that some African American and white soldiers became more mature as a result of their participation in the war. Hence, overlap exists within the private memories of African American and white soldiers on why they joined the US military, how they prepared for the war, and how the war impacted them.

Nevertheless, the oral history testimonies of African American and white soldiers diverge in a number of key ways. For example, some African American oral history testimonies reveal that racism motivated some African American soldiers to join the US military. Additionally, the physical violence generated by racism within the US military is highlighted prominently in some

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<sup>3</sup>James Lacy, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Chicago, Illinois, January 20, 2015.

<sup>4</sup>Roy Dell Johnson, interviewed by Eliot Pope. Personal Interview, Arlington, Texas, March 2, 2015.

oral history testimonies of African American soldiers, but it is not addressed in the private memories of white soldiers. African American oral history testimonies highlight the inordinate amount of time some African Americans were forced to stay out on the front lines fighting. However, the oral history testimonies of white soldiers do not address the amount of time African American soldiers were forced to fight. Also, the lack of quality equipment African American soldiers received is discussed in the oral history testimonies of African American soldiers, while it is not highlighted in the white soldiers' oral history testimonies. Consequently, the oral history testimonies of African American soldiers not only add to the historical narrative on the Korean War but also provide new information that has been overlooked by historians.

This dissertation contributes to the historical narrative in several ways. First, with only a handful of books written on the subject matter, African American soldiers have not been given a sufficient voice within the historical narrative on the Korean War. This work will help to give these soldiers such a voice. Second, books that have been written about the Korean War have taken a top-down approach to highlighting the war. That type of book has focused more on politicians and leaders within the US military and their decision to embrace integration and less on the impact Jim Crow had on African American soldiers. This method of covering the Korean War has pushed African American soldiers to the margins. Hence, my work contributes to the history on the subject by giving African American soldiers a voice within the historical narrative, further enriching the overall scholarship on African Americans and the Korean War.

Historiography's failure to capture the complexities of African American Korean War soldiers' experiences affects their legacy within US military history. In spite of poor-quality equipment, poor leadership, and racism, on the whole, African American soldiers served their country admirably. *Forgotten Soldiers from a Forgotten War: Oral Histories of African*

*American Soldiers from the Korean War* pays tribute to African American soldiers from the Korean War by giving them a platform within historiography to allow their voices to be heard.

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#### **Oral History Collections**

Veterans History Project – Library of Congress

Roscoe Robinson Jr. Transcript – US Army War College/US Army Military History

African American Veterans Oral History Project – Evansville African American Museum

Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History – University of Kentucky

Samuel Proctor Oral History Project – University of Florida

Video Oral History Walter Sanderson – History Makers

Oral History Transcripts – National Archives/U.S. Army Military History Institute (John A. Cash, Bernard L. Muehlbauer, Timothy Rainey, Mary L. Haynes, William T. Bowers, Richard O. Perry, and George L. MacGarrigle)

**Online Forums**

Korean War Project - <http://www.koreanwar.org>

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Eliot Pope was born and raised in the Chicago land area. Before attending Loyola University Chicago, he received a Bachelor of Arts in Comparative Politics from Bowdoin College in 2001 and a Master of Arts from DePaul University in 2008.

From September 2010 to present, Eliot has been awarded a tuition scholarship from Loyola University. The award has given Eliot the chance to complete his Ph.D. in American History. Since being awarded a tuition scholarship, Eliot has taken a wide range of different classes, from 19<sup>th</sup> Century American History to a Digital Media class. Additionally, Eliot has also worked as an adjunct professor at DePaul University where he taught 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century American history. While at DePaul, Eliot reconnected with professors that he had classes with, including Professor Tom Foster, Department Chair of History at DePaul University. Through his interaction with Dr. Foster and professors, Eliot sharpened his teaching skills.

Eliot currently works at Arrupe College where he teaches American Government, Western Civilization and US History. He lives in Chicago, Illinois.

