

# African-American Roles in the Armed Forces During World War 2

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## African-American's Roles in the Armed Forces During World War 2

**Objective:** Using critical thinking and observation skills as well as prior knowledge, students will gain familiarity or reinforce knowledge of African-American's and the role they played in the armed forces during World War 2.

**Grade Level:** 4 – 8

**Standards:** 4.2.4 Draw conclusions about the relationship of significant events in the history of the United States to the expansion of democracy in the United States

4.1.4 Produce clear and coherent writing to:

- Compare and contrast past and present viewpoints on a given historical topic
- Conduct simple research
- Summarize actions/events and explain significance

4.1.6 Define and distinguish between primary and secondary sources

4.1.7 Summarize primary resources and explain their historical importance

4.2.4 Draw conclusion about the relationship of significant events in the history of the United States to the expansion of democracy in the United States

4.8.4 Describe the qualities of a good citizen and how good citizenship contributes to the United States' democracy

6.1.3 Analyze information in primary and secondary sources to address document-based questions

7.3.3 Examine the motivations and influence of major American reform movements during the 19<sup>th</sup> century

7.1.5 Analyze primary and secondary sources to answer questions related to the United States history.

8.1.2 Construct and interpret a timeline of key events in Louisiana history and describe how they connect to United States and world events

**Time Requirement:** 60 minutes

**Directions:** Print out the PDF of the lesson and give each student a copy of the activity. Read the background information as a class and discuss the points and vocabulary with your students. Once students feel comfortable with the concepts of the information, have them answer the following questions. After answering the background questions, students can examine the attached photographs and answer the following questions. Students can work individually or in groups.

**Assessment:** Students can be assessed on their understanding of African-American's roles in the armed forces during World War 2 by conducting a discussion after the activity or they can be quizzed on their understanding following the activity.

**Enrichment:** Students can research an individual African-American who served during World War 2 and present their information to the class.

**Read the following background information on African-American's roles in the armed forces during World War 2 and answer the following questions. Following the discussion questions, look at the photos provided and answer the following question.**

**Background Information:**

African Americans played an important role in the military during World War 2. The events of World War 2 helped to force social changes which included the desegregation of the U.S. military forces. This was a major event in the history of Civil Rights in the United States.



*The Tuskegee Airmen from the US Air Force*

**Segregation**

The U.S. military was still segregated during World War 2. Segregation is when people are separated by race or the color of their skin. Black and white soldiers did not work or fight in the same military units. Each unit would have only all white or all black soldiers.

**What jobs did they have?**

At the start of the war, African American soldiers were generally not a part of the fighting troops. They worked behind the fighting lines driving supply trucks, maintaining war vehicles, and in other support roles. However, by the end of the war, African American soldiers began to be used in fighting roles. They served as fighter pilots, tank operators, ground troops, and officers.

**Tuskegee Airmen**

One of the most famous groups of African American soldiers was the Tuskegee Airmen. They were the first group of African American pilots in the U.S. military. They flew thousands of bombing and fighting missions over Italy during the war. Sixty-six of them gave their lives in combat.

## 761st Tank Battalion

Another famous group of African American soldiers was the 761st Tank Battalion. The 761st reinforcements that helped to save the city of Bastogne that turned the tide of the battle.

## Desegregation of the Armed Forces

Before and during the war, federal law stated that black troops could not fight alongside white troops. However, Dwight D. Eisenhower did allow African-American soldiers to fight in previously all white units during the Battle of the Bulge. The official segregation of the U.S. military ended a few years after the war when President Harry S. Truman issued an executive order desegregating the armed forces in 1948.

### Famous African American Soldiers During WW2



Figure 1 Doris Miller from the US Navy

Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. was commander of the Tuskegee Airmen during World War 2. He continued to serve in the army after the war and became the first African-American general. He earned several awards including the Air Force Distinguished Service Medal and the Distinguished Flying Cross Air Medal.

Doris Miller was a cook for the United States Navy. During the Attack on Pearl Harbor, Miller fired at incoming Japanese bombers using an anti-aircraft machine gun. He also rescued a number of injured soldiers saving their lives. He was the first African American awarded the Navy Cross for his heroism.

Samuel L. Gravely, Jr. served as commander of the USS PC-1264, a ship that hunted down enemy submarines. The crew of the ship was mostly African-American and Gravely was the first African American officer of an active fighting U.S. navy ship. Gravely later rose to the rank of vice admiral serving in both the Korean War and the Vietnam War.

### Interesting Facts about African Americans in WW2

- The Tuskegee Airmen painted the tails of their fighter planes red. This earned them the nickname the "Red Tails."
- The famous baseball player Jackie Robinson was once a member of the 761st Tank Battalion.
- First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt brought attention to the Tuskegee Airmen when she flew with one of their instructors C. Alfred Anderson.
- Several movies have been made about the Tuskegee Airmen including the 2012 *Red Tails*.
- Hall of Fame basketball player Kareem Abdul-Jabbar wrote a book about the 761st Tank Battalion called *Brothers in Arms*.

1. What was the name of the battalion that saved the city of Bastogne? \_\_\_\_\_

2. Name three jobs that African-Americans held during World War 2?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3. What does segregation mean? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

4. What is one interesting fact about African-Americans in World War 2? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

5. Who was the commander of the Tuskegee Airmen? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

6. Who was the first African-American to be awarded the Navy Cross for his heroism? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

7. Which president of the United States officially ended segregation of the U.S. military forces?  
\_\_\_\_\_

8. What impact did the desegregation of the U.S. military have on the Civil Rights Movement in America? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Choose one of the photographs provided to you by your teacher and answer the following questions.**

1. Who are the people in the photograph? How old do they seem to be? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

2. Where was the photograph taken? What clues can you gather from the photo? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

3. What can you tell about the people from the clothes they are wearing?

\_\_\_\_\_

4. What activity is shown in the photograph? Are the people doing the activity as a group or individually?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

5. What other details can you see in the photograph? Are there any tools, vehicles, animals, buildings, or signs? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

6. Summarize. What do these clues tell you about the people, time, or event shown? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_













