

Uniformed Uniformity:  
Unmasking the Camouflage of Racism in Our Military Uniforms

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I worked hard at acquiring my uniform, to be a part of “The Few, The Proud, The Marines.” Having to overcome poverty, surviving the pitfalls of urban streets and the emotional duress of my grandfather, the only father I have known passed away while I was in boot camp. Through it all, I was proud of my history and the sacrifices made by others before me so I could be a United States Marine.

After graduating Marine Combat training, my Gunnery Sergeant from my recruitment office invited me back to town, to represent and show the new recruits what was possible with hard work and dedication. My pride sent me back to Gypsy Park in Stanton, VA, the place where all my dreams started to manifest into reality. I hoped that in coming back, someone would recognize me from my recruit days so that I could show off my transformation to the man I had become in this uniform.

As I was walking in Gypsy Park, where we do all our training, showing off was really what we did. In addition, this time, I was wearing my midnight dress blues. There is a pond on my left, and as I turn to face it, I started reminiscing on how it all started for me. When I was a recruit and first introduced to this pond, I so wanted to wear this uniform then. This in part, is the reason why, as we ran through our routine, I pull a little harder and push a little more. Not just to stand out as beautiful woman jog by watching us Marines at work, but I pushed to prove to myself that I deserved to be a Marine. Therefore, so I could be able to walk into a room of men, and get that look of respect

without saying a word. There is a certain level of respect that comes with being a military man.

In my dazed state, I drifted off and stared blankly at those around me. A young white male took offense to me looking in his direction and indicated so with, "Hey nigger, what the fuck you looking at?" With my serenity shattered and caught off guard, it took me a minute to focus, to realize that I was the target of the disrespect. This was not the reunion I had imagined. I, a Lance Corporal in the United States Marine Corps, trained in hand-to-hand combat, an expert pistol and rifleman, who can put sixteen rounds in a four inch grouping and was trained for warfare, was not, upon analyzing my skills, taught how to deal with racism. I was prepared to make the enemy die for his ideals, beliefs, and country, and to give my life if necessary. The reality of not knowing how to deal with verbal abuse and the fact that this is still a reality left me morally scarred. I thought the sacrifices made by others in this uniform before me would be a buffer against this hatred. How is it that a man fighting for his country is not exempt for racial bigotry?

The event left me with numerous questions, and in the process of searching for the answers, I became aware of the harsh reality that is America. In spite of rich history and great ancestry, America has used with no regard, the very people who helped to build this nation and defend it. In Taps for a Jim Crow Army: Letters from Black Soldiers in World War 2, "A Loyal Negro Soldier" states, "I couldn't understand how white people could be so down on one who wears the uniform of the fighting forces of their country" (79).

Considering what this soldier and countless others like him have endured made me reflect on famed criminologist Émile Durkheim and his statement, “Society needs an outcast, so one group can feel superior to the other” (Durkheim, 1933). Is this why so many white people in the military and society abuse their power and authority, so they can feel superior? Does the need to be superior by white people negate the contributions by made African and Native Americans? Does one contribution have more value than the other if both represent the same cause?

In researching America’s past, I saw that it was written in blood and with hate. In WW2, African and Native Americans fought segregated and at times side-by-side with white soldiers. They fought valiantly and purposely for their country. These soldiers during and after WW2 were treated with less dignity and respect than the Germans they captured. The prisoners of war were given better food, clothing, and living spaces than the men they fought against and killed. On top of that, these men were given more respect, the P.O.W’s who were killing all Americans regardless of color since they cared more about body counts. To the Germans, the enemy was not the color of a person’s skin, but rather the color of their uniform. American soldiers, white, black, brown, and yellow all wore the same uniform and therefore died the same death (Taps for a Jim Crow Army).

In WW1, America and its Allies had a terrible time sending coded messages to their troops on the front lines because of the German who kept intercepting the messages. Mr. William C. Meadows, a Native American studies professor at Mississippi State University, convinced Washington to assign Native Americans to field units so they

could code messages in the Native language and signs. Since the Germans had no prior interactions with the Native Americans, the only way to crack the code was to get their hands on a Native American. Since all understood this, escorts were assigned to the Native Americans as executioners to prevent the Germans from gaining access (WW1: Native American Code Talkers).

On October 26, 1918, the Choctaw Tribe of the Nation of Oklahoma was to be the representative for all Native Americans and be code talkers in the process to help win the war. The men did not just code talk; they picked up guns, fought unselfishly, and at times willingly sacrificed their lives in hopes to be seen as equals. With the hope of bringing dignity and respect back to their fellow Nations. Unfortunately, during WW1, many Native Americans lost their lives; honorably it may have been, but in vain. The surviving soldiers at the end of the war were returned home, only to find nothing had changed in the hooded eyes of racism. The sacrifices they made on enemy lines meant nothing on the home front. They were carted and shipped right back to their secluded Reservations, given the same message to stay in their designated zones (WW1: Native American Code Talkers).

Brothers In Arms: The Epic Story of the 761<sup>st</sup> tank Battalion, WW2's Forgotten Heroes captures the battles fought by the 761<sup>st</sup> Tank Battalion. In 1942, during WW2, the 761<sup>st</sup> Tank Battalion was one of the most decorated Negro battalions at their time. These men helped change the course of history. This unit and its men were at the Battle of the Bulge, a major turning point in the war, a deciding factor in the battle. Throughout WW2 these men fought numerous of battles to defend America and its Allies, and to

come home and be treated as equals.

After returning from the war and on American soil, still in his uniform, Sergeant Isaac Woodward Jr., a member of the famed 761<sup>st</sup> Tank Battalion, was on his way home to North Carolina after being Honorably discharged for his duties.. After a rest stop in Batesburg, South Carolina, a sheriff with a blackjack viciously assaulted him and had a nightstick thrust into his eyes. Not only was he denied medical treatment, he was found guilty of public drunkenness, though he did not drink. The sheriff would be acquitted of all charges later brought against him for the attack against Sergeant Woodward. Sergeant Woodward Jr. was left blind and disabled from the attack. The judge who resided over this case disagreed with Sergeant Woodward's treatment and would later use it as a stepping stone to shoot down school segregation in south Carolina in the case now known as Brown v. Board of Education (Brothers in Arms, p. 251).

What a vile individual one has to be, to beat a man half to death for no other reason than the color of his skin. There should be no racism, let alone for a man in his military uniform. Did Sergeant Woodward not deserve some form of thank you for the services he rendered? How can the superiority complex override the sacrifices Sergeant Woodward made in battle for his country? This sheriff was at home in a warm bed while this man and countless others like him fought so this same sheriff can be free and have the freedom to do what he feels. Moreover, he repays the man by doing to him what the enemy could not. How must one feel to win a war and then come home to lose a battle? Is that what the 761<sup>st</sup> Tank Battalion fought for? Staff Sergeant Wall states, "I have a lot to live for but I wonder if living under certain conditions is really living or existing"

(Taps for a Jim Crow Army, p. 96).

I did not fully understand the statement by “A Loyal Negro Soldier” until I started to read America’s violent history and total disregard of its colored fighting men. Racism and hatred would not allow the brave, selfless acts these men committed in the name of their country to be recognized until 1978, when Captain William of the 761<sup>st</sup> Tank Battalion would receive a Presidential Unit Citation. However, the full exploits of this battalion would not enter in the history books until 1993, when the Military History Committee created by the pentagon researched and validated the claims presented (Brothers in Arms, p. 258).

Presently, the military as a whole has yet to conform and end racism. A report published by Department of Defense, states that since 1991 there has only been a slight increase, 6.6% of minorities in the military. 74.6% of the military is white; minorities make up the other 25.4%. Who would want to fight and defend a country with conflicting interest? America imposes its will on other countries because of how they treat their citizens, yet America is in last place when it come to equality. Countless contributions have been awarded with hate, spit, cold-water hoses and dog bites. African and Native Americans still fight for this country regardless of not having equal right or opportunities for improvement or promotion.

In The Last Patrol (2005), Second Lieutenant J. Capers Jr., went to lead an elite commando team in the Vietnam War. He and his team saved countless lives and villages in the war. “[A]n exemplary record of dangerous missions that ultimately earned him the reputation as the so-called ‘spiritual founder of Marine Corps special operations,’”

says Major general Paul E. Lefebvre.

Capers was, by all accounts, an extraordinary Marine. His tactical innovations earned him a place in the U.S. Special Operations Command's Commando Hall of Honor. So thoroughly did he represent the ideals and mythology of the Corps that his picture graced a near-ubiquitous and highly successful recruiting poster focused on attracting minority officers in the early '70s: ASK A MARINE, it said under an image of Capers in dress uniform, the ornate Mameluke sword, unique to Marine officers, at his side. The Last Patrol, p.106).

Second Lieutenant Capers was the only African American to lead an all white 20-man team in the Vietnam War. His team of elite commandos surpassed all others. The surviving members of his team has fought valiantly to get Capers' exploits recognized by getting him nominated for the highest military honor: The Medal of Honor. To achieve this honor, one must show "personal bravery or self-sacrifice so conspicuous as to clearly distinguish the individual above his or her comrades." Capers talents have surpassed this definition on numerous occasions. In 2007, his recommendation went forth with unprecedented accounts of his actions. The United States Marine Corps Awards Branch, overseen by Retired Colonel Lee Freund, upon shooting down his recommendation, responded with "Our standards are where they need to be. We don't cheapen awards" (The Last Patrol).

Institutional racism has been one of the founding principles of America. Is it not time for us as Americans, the greatest society, to do away with this outdated norm? How did we come to allow racism to transcend the uniform of our military? Our great nation was built upon the words of President Lincoln when he said, "Freedom, Justice, and Equality for all." The past does not have to be our future. We teach our children the great words spoken by those before us and tell stories of their success so they may know where we came from and how we got to the present condition. Is it time for us, America, to



write our history now.

Men, you are the first Negro tankers to ever fight in the American Army. I would never have asked for you if you weren't good. I don't care what color you are...Everyone has their eyes on you and is expecting great things from you. Most of all, your race is looking forward to your success. Don't let them down, and, damn you don't let me down!

--- General George S. Patton, November 2, 1944  
Near Nancy, France

Well America, you have allowed racism to transcend our military uniforms and disgrace those who fought and defended you. These men and countless others like them have never failed you. So now, with our eyes on you America, do not let us down.

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