

The Memory of the Great War in the African American Community

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One day a colonel met a colored captain whom he thought he had seen before. "Haven't I seen you somewhere?" he asked. "Yes, sir," replied the man, "I was with you on the [Mexican] border [in 1916]; Captain French is my name, sir." "Oh, I do remember," said the colonel, "you are Sergeant French." "No, sir, I am Captain French." "Well," said the colonel as he walked away, "if I forget and call you Sergeant, don't mind."¹

This encounter between two officers in France during the First World War encapsulated the essence of black troops' war experience: trying to serve with honor and distinction while encountering a steady torrent of racial prejudice. A host of memoirs and histories published immediately after the war took up this theme, some to make a broader political statement about the fight for civil rights and others to elicit pride among veterans who wanted the truth of both their sufferings and exploits told. Postwar political protests and demonstrations involving veterans and war widows revealed that war memories could be powerful tools in the struggle for social justice. The memorials, films, and photographs that dealt with the war tended to shy away from overt political symbolism and instead explored the impact of death, disability, and combat on black troops. Encompassing both the political and personal, these various forms of remembrance reveal how thoroughly memories of the war resonated in the African American community during the interwar period.

Written reminiscences fell into several categories. Black leaders who had worked for the War Department or undertaken their own postwar investigations wrote comprehensive overviews intended to serve as authoritative works on the black soldiers' experiences. Complementing these general pieces were a host of memoirs devoted to the history of particular units, including accounts by white officers, recollections by African American soldiers, and yearbooks marketed to veterans to commemorate their time in service. Each, in its own way, contributed a critical component to the collective memory that gradually emerged in the postwar period about black soldiers' role in the Great War.

W. E. B. Du Bois's articles in the *Crisis* were perhaps the most influential of any postwar writings on the black experience during the war. In these lengthy essays, Du Bois published numerous damning documents that members of the 92nd Division passed along to him during his investigation on behalf of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) into black soldiers' experiences overseas.² The most significant was a wartime memo written by Colonel J. A. Linard, the head of the French Military Mission attached to the U.S. Army, in which he counseled French officers to take heed of American racial sentiments. French civilians, Linard wrote, needed to stop "spoiling" American black troops because such behavior inflamed white American opinion against France.³ American military officials, Du Bois claimed, had pressured Linard to write this outrageous memo, which, he correctly pointed out, the French General Staff immediately repudiated. This incident, along with numerous other stories from veterans describing their positive social interactions with French civilians, underscored key differences between the United States and France, according to Du Bois. "Never have I seen black folk . . . so uplifted at the vision of real democracy dawning on them in France," Du Bois wrote. "There is not a black soldier but who is glad he went—glad to fight for France, the only real white Democracy."⁴

From these documents and his own investigative trip overseas, Du Bois concluded first, that France was a colorblind society that treated blacks and whites as equals, and second, that black troops had returned home determined never again to submit to the humiliations of Jim Crow.⁵ Having been treated like men in France and trained as soldiers, Du Bois contended, these men would return home fighting. "We are cowards and jackasses if now that the war is over, we do not marshal every ounce of our brain and brawn to fight a sterner, longer, more unbending battle against the forces of hell in our own land," Du Bois thundered.⁶

Like many of the World War I generation, Du Bois found it difficult to accept such a cataclysmic event without searching it for some ultimate purpose



This Signal Corps photo symbolized the dehumanized position of many black troops in the American Army with its implication that these men have replaced animals to haul this artillery piece. (Courtesy of National Archives)

besides the continuation of the status quo. During the war, Du Bois had endured a significant amount of criticism within the black community for urging black Americans to “forget our special grievances” and “close our ranks” with white Americans. Du Bois now looked hard for some redemptive aspect to the war experience to justify his earlier decision to support it.⁷ In his postwar accounts, he balanced discussions of the unrelenting racism that black soldiers encountered from American army officials with generous descriptions of France’s emergence as a model interracial democracy. His disillusion with the failure of American blacks to secure immediate gains at home gave way to the hope that returning veterans would energize the civil rights movement. These conclusions about the significance of the war for African Americans soon achieved strong currency in the black community despite widespread evidence of France’s willingness to colonize and exploit large sections of West Africa and Indo-China and the absence of activism on the part of most returning black veterans.

Emmett J. Scott and Charles Williams wrote the two other most important accounts by black leaders of the war experience. Both worked for the War Department during the war, Scott as a special assistant to Secretary of War Newton D. Baker and Williams as a special investigator for the Military Intelligence Division.⁸ Scott and Williams noted black soldiers’ positive interracial experiences overseas, but their main interest lay squarely with chronicling how African American soldiers had overcome prejudice to amass an admirable wartime record of service and achievement. “Briefly stated, the Negroes did their full share in the great struggle to make the world safe for democracy,” Scott wrote in his preface. He thought it was especially noteworthy that for the first time, African Americans had filled the ranks of technical as well as fighting and service units in the wartime army. Trying to arouse pride within the African American community, while at the same time using their insider status to confirm suspicions that black soldiers had to struggle daily with institutionalized racism, Scott and Williams argued that black soldiers were essential to the war effort. “In the years to come who will read of the work of the Negro stevedores without feeling that America owes a great debt to these men?” Williams opined. “They had a heavy and sometimes an unpleasant task, but the zeal with which they worked hastened the peace and saved the lives of thousands of men.”⁹ These were all points on which Du Bois, Scott, and Williams agreed, but while Du Bois’s planned multivolume study of the war experience languished in his files, Scott and Williams managed to get their books into print while interest in the war experience remained strong in the African American community.¹⁰

Accounts by white officers of black units formed the next most influential set of memoirs. Arthur Little’s *From Harlem to the Rhine* is the classic of this

genre, mostly because it corroborated in vivid detail the heroism of Henry Johnson and Needham Roberts, who together fought off a German raiding party that attacked their listening post.¹¹ Johnson and Roberts became the most celebrated African American soldiers of the war for this feat. As their captain, Little headed the investigation into the attack and made the first recommendation for Johnson and Roberts to receive military commendations for their heroism and valor. Sitting in an isolated listening post in no-man's-land on the night of May 12, 1918, Johnson and Roberts were part of a party of five instructed to warn the 1st Battalion, 369th Infantry of an enemy attack. Noticing movement outside their post, the two discovered an enemy patrol and gave the alert. Detected, the Germans sent an avalanche of grenades into the dugout, wounding Johnson and Roberts and separating them from the three other men in the post. Roberts was injured so severely that he could only pelt the Germans with grenades throughout "the battle of Henry Johnson." When two Germans attempted to enter their shelter, Johnson fired his rifle into the enemy soldier leading the assault. His three shots gone, Johnson had no choice but to club down the second German with his rifle butt. Glancing behind him, Johnson saw another two Germans carrying Roberts off as a prisoner. With the Germans on his front subdued, Johnson turned and jumped onto the soldier holding Roberts's shoulders. "As Johnson sprang, he unsheathed his bolo knife, and as his knees landed upon the shoulders of that ill-fated Boche, the blade of the knife was buried to the hilt through the crown of the German's head," Little wrote.¹² Johnson was not in the clear yet. The soldier he had clubbed with his rifle had risen and was bearing down on him, pistol drawn. The German shot and wounded Johnson, who nonetheless managed to plunge his knife into the enemy soldier's abdomen and turn it. "The enemy patrol was in a panic. The dead and wounded were piled upon stretchers and carried away," Little reported.¹³ Although Johnson was now critically injured and losing blood, he continued to harass the retreating Germans with grenades. Little concluded at the end of his investigation that Johnson and Roberts had killed four out of the twenty-four Germans who attacked them that night.

Like other white officers, Little intended his memoir to serve as a tribute to his troops and expected white readers to accept his endorsements of black troops' fighting abilities. The sense of distance from the men and the occasional patronizing tone that crept into the narrative may also, however, have helped confirm the widespread conclusion within the white community that blacks made fine soldiers if led by white officers.¹⁴ "Good-bye, Henry, I said, as I wrung his hand," Little wrote in the book's closing scene. "Good-bye, Henry, don't forget me." Fur-

git yer! Suh Major, Sur,' answered Henry Johnson—his eyes opening wider and wider. 'Furgit yer! Suh? Why, Suh Major, yer made a man of me!'"¹⁵

Published accounts by veterans appeared as both full-fledged memoirs and yearbooks that compiled photographs, rosters, and anecdotes to help veterans celebrate their military service. Monroe Mason and Arthur Furr, members of the 372nd Infantry, wrote a straightforward account of their unit's combat experiences that related in unsparing detail the horrors of modern war. Although Mason and Furr addressed the issue of prejudice within the army in *The American Negro Soldier with the Red Hand of France*, their main interest was describing the life-and-death struggle at the front. The fierce fighting in the Champagne offensive in the fall of 1918 took a particularly heavy toll on the regiment, costing nearly 800 casualties. "It was a pitiful sight to perceive these ragged, tired, hungry and bloodstained warriors as they slowly trudged into the village burdened with the terrible ordeal of ten days in a 'manmade hell,'" Mason and Furr reported.¹⁶

Most pictorial yearbooks tried to offer overviews of the war's causes, the key leaders, and battles while also detailing the toll of racial discrimination on black units. *A Pictorial History of the Negro in the Great War* and *Colored Soldiers in France* also reiterated another key theme emphasized by Du Bois and Scott: African Americans were not the only black men fighting in France. Both of these pictorial yearbooks included numerous photographs of West Africans at work and at play. France brought nearly 200,000 West African soldiers to France to fight on the Western Front, where they amassed admirable combat records. In contrast, American officials insisted that the overwhelming majority of African Americans serve behind the lines in labor positions. In the end, of 400,000 African American soldiers who served during the war, only 40,000 were assigned to combat units. "I took upon myself the task of gathering pictures of the race in the great war," Edward L. Snyder wrote in the preface to *Colored Soldiers in France*. "The success which has attended my efforts will be found upon these pages, and portrays our contribution for the Democracy of which we have all been called upon to make 'Safe' and secure for all mankind." By including the history of West African soldiers in their histories, these authors both complimented France for allowing these soldiers the honor of fighting and generated pride and respect in the black race.¹⁷

The failure of the Great War to deliver its promise of democracy to African Americans emerged as a key theme in several postwar civil rights campaigns led by the NAACP. The 1923 controversy over staffing the Tuskegee Veterans Hospital, a new facility reserved exclusively for black veterans, centered on whether black or white doctors would care for disabled black veterans. The



Edward L. Snyder included this picture of West African soldiers in his book *Colored Soldiers in France: A Pictorial Study of Their Part in the World War, 1914–1918*, accompanied by the following caption: “The colored colonials . . . played a most important part in the saving of Paris in the first battle of the Marne. . . . France does not fail to show her gratitude and appreciation for the loyal response of these officers and men. It is not to be marveled at that they died so bravely for France, for they loved her, because she first loved them.”

crisis put the integrationist-oriented NAACP in a difficult position—having opposed the construction of a segregated hospital for black veterans, the organization found itself lobbying the Veterans Bureau and president to ensure that black doctors and nurses profited from the government’s decision.

Memories of the war partly shaped the NAACP’s initial resistance to the project. “We all believe that the location of the hospital in the South was a mistake,” Walter White of the NAACP wrote. It seemed certain to White that “the gathering together of any considerable number of colored ex-soldiers, even though they be invalids, would cause opposition in the South.”¹⁸ With this comment, White recalled southern fears that returning black servicemen, trained in the use of firearms and fresh from experiencing social equality in France, intended to mount an armed challenge to the southern status quo. Ensuring that black veterans resumed their subservient place became an obsession in the South, resulting in several lynchings and countless other assaults on black veterans. “Some of them could not even wear their uniforms back home,” not-

ed Roy Wilkins, fearing for their lives if they did.¹⁹ An ex-serviceman doubted that many northern black veterans would want to go to a hospital in the South for treatment unless black doctors and guards were there to care and protect them. “Predeice [*sic*] is cause the colored people to leave the South an not labor condition for a colored man knows he has to labor where ever he goes,” this veteran concluded, alluding to the mass migration of southern blacks to northern cities that had peaked during the war.²⁰

When three black veterans were accused of trying to purchase ammunition in Tuskegee, it appeared to the NAACP that local authorities were trying to provoke a racial riot to convince federal authorities that race relations were too volatile to even consider appointing a black medical staff for the hospital. Luckily, this particular incident failed to incite the Ku Klux Klan, which already had marched on the hospital and threatened the lives of black personnel. Fellow inmates in the hospital raised the funds to pay the fine of the one veteran who pled guilty to carrying a concealed weapon, and all three returned to the hospital.²¹ In the end, the NAACP won the fight to staff the hospital with black doctors and nurses, but many sick veterans expressed reluctance to return to the South and receive treatment in Tuskegee.²²

Another chance to revisit the war years came in 1930 when the War Department began organizing a series of federally funded pilgrimages to France for the mothers or widows of fallen soldiers who remained buried overseas.²³ When the government decided to send separate delegations of black and white women, the NAACP organized a campaign to convince these African American women to stay home. Out of the hundred African American women scheduled to travel with the first group to France, fifty-six initially refused the invitation at the request of the NAACP.²⁴ By giving up the only chance they would likely have in their lifetimes to visit their sons’ graves, these mothers paid a heavy price to retain their honor and self-respect.²⁵ “We can be as high-spirited and courageous as the . . . fine, brave Negro women who signed the N.A.A.C.P. petition to President Hoover refusing to sail on jim crow ships, and let the power-that-be realize our spiritual and political strength,” editorialized the *Pittsburgh Courier* in support of their protest.²⁶

The memory of the war took a strange twist in the NAACP’s campaign against the segregation of black Gold Star Mothers. Instead of connecting this indignity to the discrimination endured by their loved ones before their deaths, the NAACP took a completely different tack in its protest. Now, the NAACP emphasized that all races had been asked to share equally in the burden of fighting and that black and white troops had traveled together without incident on the ships carrying desperately needed troops to France. “When

my only son as many other only sons sailed for Europe the feelings were not so that he had to be jimcrowed. He and his white brothers sailed together, fought and gave their precious lives together in the defense of this our country," stated Isabelle Morrison in her letter to the War Department when refusing a place on the pilgrimage. Morrison's revisionist view of the war years was matched by the rhetoric of the petition that the women signed declaring that "ten years after the Armistice, the principles of 1918 seem to have been forgotten."²⁷ In this particular instance, however, it seemed that it was the NAACP that had forgotten, or had chosen to forget, the reality of the war years. Rather than marking a departure from the past, the segregated Gold Star Mother pilgrimages simply continued the wartime pattern of discrimination.

The controversies surrounding the Tuskegee Veterans Hospital and the Gold Star Mothers involved mostly civilians without any personal military experience. The most sustained political activism of black ex-servicemen in the interwar period came during their participation in the Bonus March, a cause that highlighted the postwar hardships they shared with other white veterans. In 1932, approximately 40,000 World War veterans marched on Washington, D.C., to demand immediate payment of their adjusted compensation certificates. These bonds were issued to veterans in 1924 and scheduled to mature in 1945, when they would yield each veteran a payment of approximately \$1,000. The veterans arrived in May and encamped in the city until they were violently evicted by federal troops at the end of July.

In observing black veterans' presence in the Bonus March, Roy Wilkins of the NAACP concluded that black veterans actually expressed less bitterness than whites when asked about the government's refusal to pay the bonus early. "They had been told in 1917 that they were fighting for a better world, for true democracy; that a new deal would come for them; that jobs would come to them on merit, that lynching would be stopped; that they would have schools, homes, justice, and the franchise. . . . So, while the indifference of the government to the bonus agitation might be a bitter pill to the whites, it was nothing unusual to Negroes," Wilkins wrote.²⁸ The veterans' cause was of little interest to Wilkins, however. Instead, he focused on the ability of blacks and whites to stage the protest together. The peaceful race relations within the veterans' makeshift camp, Wilkins argued, illustrated convincingly that the army could successfully integrate its ranks without injuring unit discipline or morale.

In his account of the march, black veteran Morris Reynaud made no mention of social relationships between whites and blacks during the trek to Washington, D.C., or in the camps that the veterans erected there.²⁹ Instead, Reynaud emphasized the shared purpose for the demonstration. With no jobs

or prospects, Reynaud reasoned, both black and white veterans had decided that there was no time like the present to demand their money. On the way to Washington, D.C., Reynaud's group of a hundred from New Orleans had to contend with police harassment, but also met sheriffs and American Legion posts who fed, housed, and arranged for transport to state lines. Once in the nation's capital, Reynaud's biggest thrill was hearing Louisiana senator Huey Long deliver a speech. In late July 1932, he was among the veterans who fled the city after their tents and shanties went up in flames. "I don't know whether the veterans put them afire or whether those soldiers did; I don't know cause I, we were getting out of there, and we didn't have time to wait and see what happened," Reynaud recalled.³⁰

Wilkins and Reynaud drew different lessons about the war years from the Bonus March. To Wilkins, the march demonstrated that the government had made a mistake by keeping the army segregated during the war. Reynaud, however, saw another political message in the gathering of white and black veterans in Washington, D.C. For him, the Bonus Marchers' evident poverty revealed how completely the war had ruined the financial fortunes of veterans and the nation at large.

Written memoirs and political campaigns all helped sustain the memory of the war in the African American community. Memorials, films, and photographs also recalled the black soldier experience in the Great War. In France, the most visible reminders of African American soldiers' participation in the war were the two memorials erected by veterans of the 371st and 372nd regiments to their fallen comrades, and their inclusion in a general memorial constructed by the U.S. government in Sommepey dedicated to all the American troops who fought in the Champagne region during the First World War.³¹ Members of the 372nd raised the needed funds for their memorial before they left France, and entrusted the money to the French commanders under whom they had served with instructions to place the monument near an accessible road at the furthest point of the unit's advance in the Champagne region. As requested, General Mariano Goybet and Colonel Augustin Quillet located the small granite obelisk on the main road south of Monthois and erected a small chain link fence to safeguard the memorial.³²

Congressman Hamilton Fish, who had served as a captain in the 369th Infantry Regiment during the war, fought continuously throughout the 1920s to secure government funding for a monument dedicated solely to the exploits of the four black infantry regiments that made up the provisional 93rd Division. "Such a monument would not only teach loyalty and patriotism but would carry a message to the Negro race that there is no discrimination for the soldier who

ALL RIOT ON THE BLACKFACE FRONT!



Hollywood films, like this 1930 Paramount release starring the black-face duo George Moran and Charles E. Mack, lampooned black participation in the war (Copyright files, "Anybody's War," LP1460, Motion Picture and Television)

wears the United States uniform and is willing and glad to lay down his life for his country," Fish urged in a 1926 report to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs.³³ In the end, members of these regiments had to content themselves with their inclusion in the Somme American Monument, dedicated in 1937 on Blanc Mont Ridge.

After the war, Hollywood films remained mired in caricature when it came to depicting black soldiers' experiences. Warner Brothers' mainstream black-face comedy, *Ham and Eggs at the Front* (1927), for example, continued the tired formula of portraying black soldiers as bumbling fools who despite their own ineptness manage to capture a German spy.³⁴ Advance publicity from Paramount hawking *Anybody's War* (1930), starring George Moran and Charles Mack, a burlesque blackface comedy team, quoted Mack's character as saying "Must be a funny war, Willie, if we's in it!"³⁵

Films marketed to black audiences offered a starkly different image of African American participation in the war. In 1919, *Injustice* (also known by the titles *Democracy; or, a Fight for Right* and *Loyal Hearts*), picked up on the

predominant conclusion among black leaders that the nation had reneged on its promises to African Americans. Having fought with honor, "The Negro Now Appeals for Fairness in the Name of Humanity," proclaimed the headline of an *Injustice* press release.³⁶ The film's tame plot of love lost and found along the Western Front, however, disappointed those attracted by the film's misleading publicity, which promised a glaring indictment of racial prejudice in the army.

Though few in number, dramatic films made for black audiences embraced a range of reactions to the war experience. In these, the color of the characters' skin was beside the point. Instead, filmmakers created melodramatic and comedic films that dealt openly with the presence of both respectable and troubled World War I veterans in the black community. Not all black filmmakers felt compelled to depict returning servicemen as heroes. The cast of characters in Oscar Micheaux's *The Wages of Sin* (1928) includes a younger brother who has run away from the fighting in France and returns to wreak havoc in his responsible older brother's life.³⁷ *Absent* (1928) dealt straightforwardly with the problem of shell shock, detailing the struggles of a black veteran to regain his memory.³⁸ In the film, the veteran eventually recovers and makes a fresh start in life after receiving help from the American Legion. Clarence Brooks was credited by one reviewer with bringing "to the screen a sincere, human and sympathetic portrayal of a derelict soldier."³⁹

The disabled veteran received somewhat different treatment in *The Flying Ace* (1926).⁴⁰ In the film, Laurence Criner starred as Captain Billy Stokes, a decorated World War I aviator who returns home and is immediately rehired in his old job as a railroad detective to discover who stole a \$25,000 payroll. Accompanying Stokes is his mechanic, Peg, a disabled World War I veteran who has lost a leg in the war.⁴¹ As Stokes proceeds to methodically solve the mystery and win the girl, Peg is instructed to disguise him as a tramp to help apprehend the culprits. Interestingly, Peg's character is intended to provide comic relief. Rather than evoking a sense of tragedy or pity, the one-legged Peg draws laughs for his imaginative and able use of his crutch as a banjo, to aid in riding a bicycle, and to hide a gun. Despite his disability, Peg adroitly hops a freight train, chases down the thieves, and, in the movie's most engaging scene, shoots out the tires of the getaway car while pursuing the robbers on a bicycle.

The Flying Ace was the first silent film with an all-black cast to incorporate staged flying sequences (that all actually took place on the ground), including a daring rescue in which the actress Kathryn Boyd climbs up a rope ladder from one plane to another to escape a burning fuselage. *The Flying Ace* associated

African Americans with the romance of the air war and in 1926 could boast that it "has situations in it which haven't been shown in a white picture."⁴² The following year, *Wings*, winner of the first Academy Award for Best Picture, would surpass *The Flying Ace* with a dizzying array of aerial stunts.⁴³

In *The Flying Ace*, good prevails over bad, the hero gets the girl, and blacks have the chance to prove their worth. By portraying Stokes as a decorated war pilot, however, *The Flying Ace* played fast and loose with the facts of black soldiers' experiences during the war. The War Department never trained or even considered training black pilots. The only African American pilot in the war, Eugene Bullard, flew for the French.⁴⁴ Bullard was a larger-than-life figure who wore scarlet breeches, sported a chest full of medals, and flew with a small monkey as a mascot. He was living in France when the war broke out and immediately joined the French Foreign Legion. After receiving a serious leg wound at Verdun that left him disabled, he enlisted in flight school and joined the Lafayette Escadrille. When the United States entered the war, he tried to enlist in the American air service but was rejected. While Bullard's life of daring and adventure provided some basis in fact for the Stokes character, the dismal truth was that black military pilots could not fly for the United States military until 1943.

Documentary films also related both the heroic and tragic aspects of the war. Most of these used official Signal Corps footage. In March 1919, the Frederick Douglass Film Company released its last motion picture, *Heroic Negro Soldiers of the World War*. "The company is owned and controlled by Negroes, whose aim is to present the better side of Negro life, and to use the screen as a means of bringing about better feeling between the races," noted a reviewer for the *New York Age*.⁴⁵ *From Harlem to the Rhine*, credited as a U.S. War Department production, chronicled the experiences of the 369th Regiment and played to a packed house in May 1920, at a screening organized by the Veterans Corps, 15th Regiment, Incorporated, as a fund-raiser to purchase a permanent home for the veterans group. (The New York 15th Regiment had become the 369th when mobilized for federal service during the war.) "The colored public is hungry for moving pictures in which race soldiers appear on the screen in a favorable and complimentary light," surmised Lester A. Walton, who reviewed the film for the *New York Age*.⁴⁶ As they watched the film, the members of this famed combat unit got an opportunity to relive their time in the firing line, their march into Germany, and the historic parade up Fifth Avenue upon their return home. The evening did not pass without incident, however. When a Cuban immigrant refused to remove his hat during the playing of the "Stars and Stripes," several offended ex-servicemen had to be restrained from attacking him.

In the twenties, the Signal Corps made a series of films intended mainly for viewing at veterans' reunions. *The 93rd Division* gave these veterans another chance to relive their army days, with scenes of soldiers drilling, parading on review, wearing French helmets, learning to man and defend their trenches at a moment's notice, and shooting while wearing gas masks.⁴⁷ Interestingly, the Signal Corps made no film for the 92nd Division. This much maligned unit had unfairly been charged with cowardice during the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, and the War Department apparently decided it did not merit a commemorative film.

In contrast to the general celebratory tone of the documentaries that appeared in the immediate postwar period, *The Unknown Soldier Speaks* (1934) focused on the horror of the war to promote an antiwar attitude within the black community. Like *The Flying Ace*, which revealed that African Americans shared the general society's fascination with flight in the twenties, *The Unknown Soldier* was the black version of a host of antiwar films that appeared in the 1930s. A generation after the war, Americans reached the general consensus that the World War had been a horrific mistake. "About the only difference between this picture and some dozen previous war compilations is that it is devoted in a large measure to Negro soldiers," noted a review in *Film Daily*; "the picture is so preachy that it verges on maudlin anti-war propaganda."⁴⁸ *Variety* liked it a bit more, with the reviewer commenting, "Lincoln Productions is partial to the Negro's part in the conflict. But this isn't prejudicial to the picture's success. Instead, it is to its advantage because it gives regular customers a generous slice of war life which most of this offering's predecessors have minimized."⁴⁹

Films were not the only visual medium through which African American artists remembered the war experience. Photographer James VanDerZee incorporated images of veterans into a growing portfolio that documented the material and social advances of blacks in the twenties and thirties. In his portraits of war veterans, VanDerZee worked with an array of props to take heavily staged pictures that highlighted the middle-class status of his subjects. In the postwar period, VanDerZee favored the popular technique of retouching images to create a photomontage.⁵⁰ By juxtaposing different images, VanDerZee was able to create dream sequences within his photographs to give them a surreal quality. One such image, "The Last Good-bye—Overseas, 1923" pictures a dozing doughboy, dressed in a well-fitting uniform whose dream appears overhead in the form of a soldier bowing his head before a cross marking the grave of a comrade overseas. The light from this heavenly vision illuminates the American flag, the soldier's well-shined boots, and a small dog sitting at his feet. The photograph beautifully sums up the black soldier's patriotism and

sacrifice during the war, while firmly rooting him in the middle-class values of home and hearth once he has returned home.

VanDerZee's photographs of Needham Roberts and Henry Johnson, taken immediately after the war and then a few years later, emphasized the respect due these two war heroes without revealing the difficulties that they faced re-adjusting to postwar life. In 1920, VanDerZee positioned the two in uniform before a raging fire, with a gas mask at Roberts's feet. The military prop immediately recalls their time in the trenches, and their unsmiling, stoic gaze into the camera's lens projects the unflinching courage that enabled these men to fight so bravely that night in May 1918. Nearly a decade later, a bit heavier and wearier, the two pose in civilian clothes with their medals pinned to their chests.⁵¹ This time, instead of looking directly into the camera, each looks off in the distance, as if sadly recalling the earlier bloodshed they had witnessed. Above their heads floats the image of a soldier protecting a Red Cross nurse, who in turn cares for a wounded soldier lying at her feet.

Posing in a posh drawing room, with Johnson leaning against a piano and Roberts seated in a large, upholstered chair, the two appeared as the perfect embodiment of middle-class respectability. The truth was strikingly different. Roberts would eventually die in a mental hospital. Johnson returned to an adoring public, riding to general acclaim in the victory parade down Fifth Avenue. He spent a few months traveling the lecture circuit to tell his story and basked in the adulation of well-wishers who freely offered him drinks and money. When interest in his feats died down, Johnson returned to Albany, New York, but struggled to maintain a tranquil, postwar family life. Due to a clerical error on his discharge certificate that made no mention of his injuries, Johnson was denied a disability allowance even though his painful war wounds made it increasingly difficult for him to hold a job. Within a few years of his return, he and his wife divorced and an alcoholic Johnson was living the life of an unemployed vagrant.⁵² He died under mysterious circumstances in 1929 and was buried in Arlington Cemetery.

Horace Pippin, a self-taught artist who recorded his combat experiences in a series of sketchbooks, also understood the difficulty of returning home. Pippin was wounded by a sniper in his right shoulder and lost use of his right hand when going into battle with the 369th. Because he was only able to work sporadically when he returned home, his family survived on his \$22.50 a month disability allowance and his wife's work as a laundress. Pippin was not a recluse, however. He took an active interest in his community and even served as commander of his local black American Legion post in West Chester, Pennsylvania, for several years. Yet despite this outward appearance of nor-

malcy, Pippin often experienced bouts of depression and was haunted by his memories of combat. He tried unsuccessfully to write of his experiences and then finally decided to try to paint again, using his left hand to guide his right. His first effort was *The End of The War: Starting Home* (1931). He spent three years working on *The End of the War*, trying to get right the image that he had been carrying around in his head since returning home. In these early years, his friends and family were supportive of what they saw as nothing more than a harmless hobby, and Pippin sometimes managed to use his paintings to settle outstanding bills. In 1937, however, Pippin was discovered by the Philadelphia art community and soon received national recognition as a true primitive who painted in a style reminiscent of Jacob Lawrence and Grandma Moses. Although this rags-to-riches tale seemingly provided a happy ending to Pippin's story, his physical pain, taste for alcohol, and mounting family problems made this success bittersweet. The war was never far from his thoughts. In recounting his life story to a journalist in 1940, Pippin devoted only a few paragraphs to his pre- and postwar years, while taking pages to relate his service overseas. In 1946, Pippin died of a stroke.⁵³

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

Pippin documented the emotional and physical toll of the war's carnage on African American soldiers, who in his paintings represent all the Allied soldiers who fought in the war. His paintings transcended the racial barriers of contemporary civilian life by recalling the similar nightmares that plagued all combat veterans, regardless of skin color or nationality. For Pippin, combat in the First World War had been the defining moment of his life, and his paintings are among the best, if not the best, by any American artist of the conflict.

Through a variety of forms—memoirs, political protests, memorials, films, photographs, and paintings—African Americans evaluated the significance of the war to their community in the interwar period. A few exceptional artists and writers revealed to the larger community the horror and abuse experienced by black soldiers in both the front lines and the rear. Political commentators highlighted the heroism of African American soldiers to counter white Americans'

tendency to depict them as bumbling fools with little ability as officers or fighters. Civil rights leaders recalled the war experience to goad the government into according war veterans and widows a measure of social justice. Visual artists—photographers, filmmakers, and painters—tended to emphasize the hardships visited on individuals, noting that the war had created hundreds, if not thousands of personal tragedies. In the end, the war generated both a feeling of disgust with white America and a sense of pride in the achievements of black soldiers, both American and West African. War memories spurred a measure of creative output and political activism and, most importantly, imparted important lessons for the African American community once another world war loomed on the horizon. In the next, African Americans refused to believe that a grateful America would reward them after the war for their support. This time, they made their demands up front and fought simultaneously for victory both at home and abroad.

NOTES

1. Charles H. Williams, *Sidelights on Negro Soldiers* (Boston: B. J. Brimmer, 1923), 65.
2. The 92nd Division was one of two black combatant divisions created by the War Department. The other, the provisional 93rd Division, consisted of four infantry regiments (369th, 370th, 371st, and 372nd) that served with the French army for most of the war.
3. "Documents of the War," *Crisis* 18 (May 1919): 16–18. See also "Our Success and Failure," *Crisis* 18 (July 1919): 127–30.
4. W. E. B. Du Bois, "An Essay Toward a History of the Black Man in the Great War," *Crisis* 18 (June 1919): 63–87.
5. For other essays by W. E. B. Du Bois that explore these themes, see "The Black Man in the Revolution of 1914–1918," *Crisis* 17 (Mar. 1919): 218–23 and "Vive la France!" *Crisis* 17 (Mar. 1919): 215–16.
6. W. E. B. Du Bois, "Returning Soldiers," *Crisis* 18 (May 1919): 13–14.
7. W. E. B. Du Bois, "Close Ranks," *Crisis* 16 (July 1918): 111. See also his article "A Philosophy in Time of War," *Crisis* 16 (Aug. 1918): 164–65. Du Bois eventually regretted supporting the war. For more on his postwar writings and views on the significance of the war, see Jennifer D. Keene, "W. E. B. Du Bois and the Wounded World: Seeking Meaning in the First World War for African-Americans," *Peace and Change* 26.2 (Apr. 2001): 135–52.
8. Emmett J. Scott, *Scott's Official History of the American Negro in the World War* (Chicago: Homewood, 1919); Williams, *Sidelights on Negro Soldiers*.
9. Williams, *Sidelights on Negro Soldiers*, 248.
10. The draft versions and supporting documents for Du Bois's unpublished "Wounded World" manuscript are held by Fisk University, Tennessee.
11. Arthur W. Little, *From Harlem to the Rhine: The Story of New York's Colored Volunteers* (New York: Covici, Friede, 1936). Nearly every book devoted to black soldiers' experiences during the First World War discussed the exploits of Johnson and Roberts. Little's had the distinction of being a firsthand account.
12. *Ibid.*, 195.
13. *Ibid.*, 196.
14. Another memoir by a white officer suffered from the same problem. Chester D. Heywood, *Negro Combat Troops in the World War: The Story of the 371st Infantry* (Worcester, Mass.: Commonwealth, 1928), gave an engrossing account of the unit's combat experience, but the "humorous" stories about the men played to prevailing stereotypes of the time.
15. Little, *From Harlem to the Rhine*, 368.
16. Monroe Mason and Arthur Furr, *The American Negro Soldier with the Red Hand of France* (Boston: Cornhill, 1920), 125–26.
17. *A Pictorial History of the Negro in the Great War, 1917–1918* (New York: Touissant Pictorial, 1919); Edward L. Snyder, ed., *Colored Soldiers in France: A Pictorial Study of Their Part in the World War, 1914–1918* (n.p., 1919). For examples of other yearbooks that featured short articles by soldiers, newspaper clippings, and anecdotes about black soldiers' overseas experiences, see *Complete History of the Colored Soldiers in the World War* (New York: Bennett & Churchill, 1919); M. V. Lynk, *The Negro Pictorial Review of the Great World War* (Memphis, Tenn.: Twentieth Century Art, 1919); *Heroes of 1918: Stories from the Lips of Black Fighters* (Chicago: O. Walker, 1919).
18. Walter White, assistant secretary of NAACP, to Marianna G. Brubaker, July 16, 1923, in "Tuskegee Institute—July 5–July 20, 1923," folder, box C-410, part 1, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Papers, Library of Congress (hereafter NAACP Papers, LC). For the complete history of the incident, see Pete Daniel, "Black Power in the 1920s: The Case of Tuskegee Veterans Hospital," *Journal of Southern History* 36.3 (Aug. 1970): 368–88.
19. Roy Wilkins, "The Bonuseers Ban Jim Crow," *Crisis* 39 (Oct. 1932): 316–17, 332.
20. Ex-serviceman, St. Louis, Mo., to Frank T. Hines, director, Veterans Bureau, July 10, 1923, file #15.076, Hospital 91, Tuskegee, Alabama; entry 2A NM 60, General Correspondence of the Director, Records of the Bureau of War Risk Insurance; Record Group 15, Records of the Veterans Administration, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (hereafter RG 15, NA).
21. NAACP press release, Aug. 2, 1923 and Frank T. Hines, director, Veterans Bureau to James Weldon Johnson, secretary of NAACP, Aug. 16, 1923. Both in "Tuskegee Institute—July 23–Aug. 21, 1923," folder, box C-410, NAACP Papers, LC.
22. Memorandum, L. B. Rogers, medical director, July 30, 1923, file 15.076, Hospital 91, Tuskegee, Alabama, RG 15, NA.
23. Of the 17,389 women eligible for the government-sponsored trip, 624 were black.
24. "Gold Star Trip," *New York World Telegram*, Mar. 26, 1931, clipping in "Gold Star Mothers, Press Release and Clippings, 1930," box L-16, part 2, NAACP Papers, LC.
25. The War Department sent these women repeated invitations in the following years, and eventually all but twenty-three made the trip. Richard A. Serrano, "Poignant Protest," *Los Angeles Times Magazine* (Sept. 15, 2002): 16–17, 33.
26. *Pittsburgh Courier* clipping, June 7, 1930, in "Gold Star Mothers, Press Release and Clippings, 1930–1," box L-16, part 2, NAACP Papers, LC.
27. Isabelle Morrison to Quartermaster General, War Department, Apr. 23, 1930, and Walter White, Acting Secretary of the NAACP to President Herbert Hoover, May 23, 1930. Both in "Gold Star Mothers, Correspondence" folder, box L-16, part 2, NAACP Papers, LC.
28. Wilkins, "The Bonuseers Ban Jim Crow."

29. Morris Reynaud oral history, Amistad Research Center, Tulane Univ., New Orleans, La.
30. Christopher Drew, "Vet of the Bonus March," *New Orleans States-Item*, Oct. 30, 1979, B-1; B-3.
31. American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC), *American Armies and Battlefields in Europe* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1938), 350, 361, 526.
32. Colonel Herschel Tupes, commander, 372nd Regiment, to General Mariano Goybet and Colonel Augustin Quillet, Jan. 9, 1919. Letter reprinted in Scott, *The American Negro in the World War*, chap. 18. ABMC, *American Armies and Battlefields in Europe*, 526.
33. "Monument in France to Colored American Infantry Regiments Attached to the French Army," Mar. 24, 1926, Report No. 647, House of Representatives, 69th Cong., 1st sess., p. 5.
34. Plot synopsis, copyright file *Ham and Eggs* (1927), file #LP24,662, microfilm, Motion Picture and Television Reading Room, LC. This film is presumed lost. Synopses of lost films have been compiled from newspaper reviews, press kits, and copyright files.
35. Pressbook, copyright file *Anybody's War* (1930), file #LP1460, microfilm, Motion Picture and Television Reading Room, LC. A preservation copy of this film is held by the Library of Congress, but no viewing copy is available.
36. *Injustice* entry, American Film Institute Catalog, online database, www.afl.com/members/catalog. A printed version of this catalog is also available. Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), 175-76.
37. *The Wages of Sin* (1928) entry, American Film Institute Catalog online database, www.afl.com/members/catalog.
38. *Absent* (1928) entry, American Film Institute Catalog online database, <http://www.afl.com/members/catalog>.
39. *Review of Absent*, *Los Angeles New Age Dispatch*, Aug. 28, 1928, reprinted in Henry T. Sampson, *Blacks in Black and White: A Source Book on Black Films* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1995), 281.
40. *The Flying Ace*, viewing copy in Library of Congress Motion Picture and Television Reading Room.
41. Peg was played by Steve Reynolds, a one-legged actor who appeared in several other films in the 1920s.
42. Pressbook quoted in Sampson, *Blacks in Black and White*, 217.
43. Stephen Pendo, *Aviation in the Cinema* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1985), 76-79.
44. Jamie Cockfield, "Eugene Bullard, America's First Black Military Aviator, Flew for France during World War I," *Military History* 12.6 (Feb. 1996): 74-78.
45. Review of *Heroic Negro Soldiers of the World War*, *New York Age*, May 24, 1919, reprinted in Sampson, *Blacks in Black and White*, 182.
46. Lester A. Walton, *Review of From Harlem to the Rhine*, *New York Age*, May 5, 1920, reprinted in Sampson, *Blacks in Black and White*, 250-51.
47. *The 93rd Division*, #111-M-93, Signal Corps Film, RG 111, NA, College Park, Md.
48. Review of *The Unknown Soldier*, *Film Daily*, May 26, 1934, reprinted in Sampson, *Blacks in Black and White*, 434. Also see *The Unknown Soldier Speaks* (1934), #M4704, microfilm, Copyright Files, Motion Picture and Television Reading Room, LC.
49. Review of *The Unknown Soldier*, *Variety* (May 29, 1934): 12.

50. Deborah Willis-Braithwaite, *VanDerZee: Photographer, 1886-1983* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1993).
51. It remains unclear exactly when this photograph was taken: it is erroneously marked 1916. Some experts have suggested that VanDerZee took the photograph in 1932, when he took a series of portraits of Roberts. Johnson, however, had been dead for three years by then.
52. Johnson's grave in Arlington Cemetery was not discovered until 2002. Until then, it was assumed that he was buried in an unmarked pauper's grave in Albany. Arlington Cemetery press releases, Jan. 11, 2002, Feb. 10, 2002, and Mar. 19, 2002. Arlington Cemetery Web site, www.arlingtoncemetery.com/henry-johnson.htm; Victor J. DiSanto, "Henry Johnson's Paradox: A Soldier's Story," *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* 21.2 (1997): 7-18.
53. Works on Horace Pippin include *I Tell My Heart: The Art of Horace Pippin*, ed. Judith E. Stein (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, 1993); Selden Rodman, *Horace Pippin: A Negro Painter in America* (New York: Quadrangle, 1947); Stephen May, "World War I Veteran Horace Pippin Used Art to Purge Himself of the Horrors of the Trenches," *Military History* 14 (Feb. 1998): 14-18, 80.