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Analysis of the A Historic Context for the African American Military Experience (CRRC 98-87)
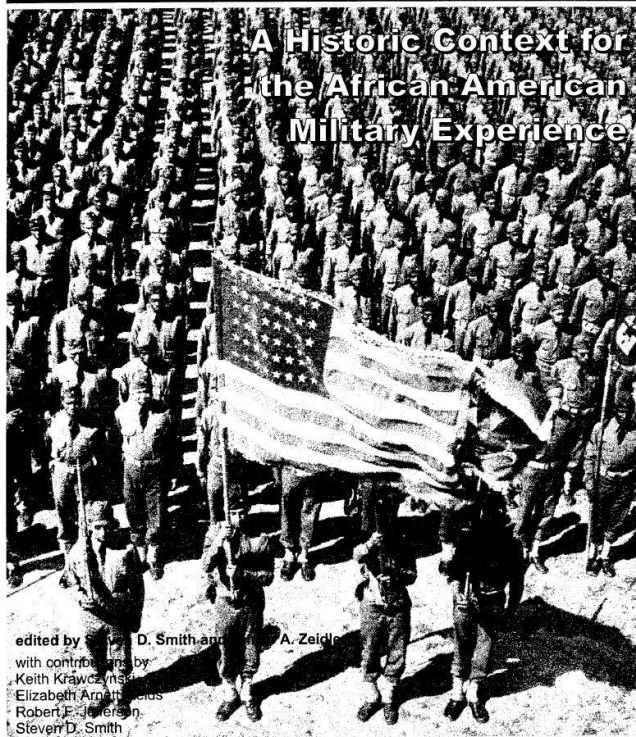
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Final Report

Analysis of the A Historic Context for the African American Military Experience (CRRC 98-87)

Analysis by Aaron R. Schmidt, Master of Arts in Public History

Original report by Smith, Steven D. and James A. Zeidler, editors. 1998. *A Historic Context for the African American Military Experience*. USACERL, CRRC 98-87.

In the late twentieth century, a growing number of Americans sought to recognize the history of Black service members and the buildings, sites, and objects associated with their enlistment. *A Historic Context for the African American Military Experience* (1998) contributed to this field of study by providing a comprehensive history of African American service in the Armed Forces of the United States. The authors felt that such a historic context was lacking for cultural resource managers at installations across the country. Consequently, the authors created this report for use "as a first step in the nomination process for specific sites, buildings, and possibly objects relevant to the African American military experience," providing a framework through which a resource's significance can be understood.[1] By offering a full account of African American military service, this report is intended to hasten determinations of National Register eligibility related to that history, saving installations time and money. While some important topics are not detailed in the report, such as the role of World War I (WWI) veterans in shaping interwar-era civil rights, the efforts of African Americans in the Women's Army Corps during World War II (WWII), and the desegregation process following Executive Order (E.O.) 9981 in 1948, the authors otherwise provide a broad foundation for evaluating the contributions of Black service members.

The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (NHPA) established procedures through which to evaluate and preserve historic resources in the United States. It also established a National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) into which eligible historic resources may be nominated. According to the NRHP, a resource is determined eligible based on its significance within a historic context and retention of enough physical integrity to convey that significance.[2] Sections 106 and Sections 110 of the NHPA require federal agencies to assess their historic resources. Specifically, Section 110 requires agencies to inventory and evaluate their historic resources for potential National Register eligibility. Section 106 requires agencies to

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[1] Steven D. Smith and James A. Zeidler, editors. 1998. *A Historic Context for the African American Military Experience*. USACERL, CRRC 98-87. p. 15.

[2] National Park Service. 1997. *National Register Bulletin #15: How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation.* p. 2.

determine the consequences of federal undertakings that adversely impact eligible, or potentially eligible, resources in the NRHP.

A Historic Context for the African American Military Experience is written and edited by credentialed professionals who specialize in history and anthropology. Contributors include Keith Krawczynski, an early American historian, Elizabeth Arnett Fields, a public historian, and Robert F. Jefferson, a historian who specializes in African American military history. The report is assembled and edited by Steven D. Smith, an anthropologist who has written extensively on historic settlement within military installations, and James A. Zeidler, a research scientist who specializes in archeology and social anthropology. In addition to editing the report, Smith also contributed to chapter three and chapter nine.

Originally, the authors intended to create a report that accomplished three objectives. First, they planned to create a historic context for African American military service in the United States, concentrating on a time frame between 1862-1920. Next, the team planned to conduct fieldwork to identify potential sites associated with the historic context. Finally, the authors intended to create National Register nominations for eligible sites associated with the historic context. At the end of the third step, the authors intended to submit the completed nominations to cultural resource managers at appropriate installations. The authors planned to complete these objectives over a period of three years, dedicating their first year for historic context research, the second year for site visits and associated fieldwork, and the final year for National Register work. Legacy funding for the project ended unexpectedly during the second year of research, so the authors could not proceed with the intended site visits and National Register nominations. Due to these budgetary constraints, the authors rescaled the report. Ultimately, they concentrated their efforts on the historic context portion of the project, expanding the period of investigation from the American colonial era until the end of official military segregation in 1954.[3]

A Historic Context for the African American Military Experience contains nine chapters and four appendices (A-D). Chapter one introduces the report, outlining its objectives, organization, and themes. The majority of this report (chapters two through eight) is a sequential narrative of African American military service. These chapters attempt to recount 400 years of history related to themes of peacetime exclusion, initial wartime exclusion, and limited wartime inclusion. In chapter nine, the authors outline themes that can be used to assign significance to resources associated with the African American military experience. The chapter also includes a list of relevant sites that are, or may be, eligible for National Register listing. Appendix A contains a list of individuals who played a significant role in the African American military experience. Appendix B contains a list of Congressional Medal of Honor recipients (1863-1953), which is organized alphabetically by conflict. Appendix C contains a copy of the survey questionnaire that

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[3] Smith and Zeidler, pp. 13-4.

the authors distributed to various installations, and Appendix D outlines the survey results.

A recurring theme throughout the historic context is that African American military members always had two battles to fight—one against a foreign enemy, and the other against domestic discrimination and segregation. The authors are attentive to both aspects, demonstrating that Black soldiers often saw military service as a proving ground through which to express their loyalty for the country. After any given conflict, they reasoned that such loyalty would be rewarded with fair treatment and greater civic opportunities. The hope to achieve greater domestic rights in exchange for military service climaxed in WWI and WWII—both conflicts in which African American soldiers fought to defeat tyranny abroad.[4] Unfortunately, while this was not the case for most of American military history, the authors ultimately suggest that expanded opportunities for African Americans in WWII and the legal desegregation of the Armed Forces of the United States in 1948 provided a model for the Civil Rights movement.[5]

Chapter two, "African Americans before the Civil War," is one of the shortest chapters in the report but includes the longest time frame. Extending from the seventeenth century until the mid-nineteenth century, this chapter recounts the involvement of Black service members in conflicts such as the Indian Wars of the colonial era, the American Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, and the Mexican American War. Ultimately, the author identifies a cyclic pattern for African American military service that repeated until WWII: "exclusion during peacetime, initial exclusion during wartime, and eventual acceptance in the face of critical manpower shortages."[6] During this period, officials denied African Americans from participating in peacetime militias due to the fear that their involvement might enable an armed insurrection. However, officials often overlooked this practice in desperate times because of manpower shortages and requested all able-bodied men, regardless of race, to defend colonial interests.[7] While African Americans were sometimes integrated into white regiments in the colonial era and the Revolutionary War, they became officially segregated into all-Black units by the War of 1812—a policy that continued for almost a century and a half.

Primarily referencing secondary sources, this chapter provides a detailed compilation of African American service in the pre-Civil War era. However, the author gives no indication of which information may be most relevant in connection to current historic sites. Such direction would have been beneficial in this chapter because it deals with an early era of American history in which there are few physical remains. While chapter nine offers a brief list of sites associated with the pre-Civil War era of African American military service, including cross-references to these sites in chapter two (and maintaining this format in chapters three through

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[4] Smith and Zeidler, pp. 154, 249

[5] Smith and Zeidler, p. 215

[6] Smith and Zeidler, p. 22.

[7] Smith and Zeidler, p. 19.

eight) would have enhanced the connection between the narrative text and relevant historic sites.

The third chapter, "African Americans in the Civil War," describes the roles of Black service members in the Union and Confederate armed forces. The authors compare the experience of African American soldiers in the North and the South, addressing how their roles evolved as the war developed. In the South, the Confederate Army used over 500,000 enslaved men to perform menial labor but did not allow African Americans to fight on their behalf due to a persisting fear that arming enslaved people would encourage an insurrection.[8] This policy changed in 1865 when desperation caused the Confederacy to enlist Black soldiers on a limited basis. The Union military also forced approximately 200,000 African Americans to perform menial labor.[9] However, the North eventually adopted a strategy for training and arming African Americans, both free and enslaved. Many Black soldiers believed the war presented an opportunity to prove their worth as Americans, and their valor would earn them equal treatment in peacetime. Still, not all African Americans sought to join military ranks, citing unequal pay, disparate living conditions, and the danger of being killed in the event of Confederate capture.[10] The chapter also discusses important turning points for African American military service, such as the formation of the segregated United States Colored Troops (USCT). Although the USCT made the recruitment, organization, and mobilization of Black soldiers more uniform, its creation further solidified the policy of segregation in the American military.

In chapter three, the authors describe the full experience of African American service members during the Civil War. They not only recount the predicable details of training and battle, but strive to emphasize that African American service members often filled the labor positions "digging trenches and wells, drawing sand, dredging swamps, felling trees, cleaning latrines and ship bunkers, and building fortifications, bridges, and railways."[11] Consequently, African Americans likely played a bigger role in shaping the physical landscape and infrastructure associated with the war than is traditionally recognized. Therefore, it would have been beneficial if the authors dedicated part of this chapter (or an appropriate section of chapter nine) to explaining how the labor of African Americans impacted the physical landscape and the implications of this for the interpretation of Civil War sites. If the authors did not know the status of this impact at the time of publication, then it may have been instructive for them to include recommendations for future research.

Chapter four, entitled "The West: 1865-1897," reviews the history of African American military service between the Civil War and the Spanish American War. The federal government allowed African Americans to enlist for peacetime military service following the Civil War, forming several regular, segregated

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[8] Smith and Zeidler, pp. 50, 75.

[9] Smith and Zeidler, p. 54.

[10] Smith and Zeidler, p. 59.

[11] Smith and Zeidler, p. 63.

regiments. Most Black soldiers served in the West, far removed from the country's Eastern population centers. In this chapter, the authors focus their attention on four regiments that comprised most African American soldiers in the late nineteenth century: two cavalry regiments (the 9th and the 10th Cavalries) and two infantry regiments (the 24th and the 25th Infantries). The author summarizes the formation of these regiments, along with the locations in which they served. Through this narrative, the authors highlight the transitory nature of these regiments—especially the 9th and 10th Cavalries, who became engaged in missions stretching from the southern border to the Dakota Territory.[12]

According to the author's intent, this "examination of the four African American Regular Army regiments is not meant to be comprehensive. Instead, its purpose is to characterize their service."[13] However, at times the chapter seems encumbered with tangential details, such as the recounting of civil disputes with the 9th Cavalry in Wyoming.[14] In other places, additional details would have been beneficial, such as describing collaborative efforts between African American regiments in Western campaigns. Additionally, there is no clear attempt to address the paradox surrounding the use of Buffalo Soldiers, a marginalized group, to fight Native Americans, another marginalized population. While there is disagreement about how to interpret this irony, as demonstrated by historian Frank Schubert in *Buffalo Soldiers: Myths and Realities*, it is important to consider if the ultimate goal is to commemorate a potential historic site.[15]

The fifth chapter, "The Spanish American War and Aftermath," provides a history of African American military service during the war and in the years leading up to WWI. The chapter not only highlights the struggle Black soldiers faced in Cuba, but also the harassment they endured while stationed in Florida *en route* to war. The authors present a nuanced account of African Americans' sentiments concerning enlistment. As in prior conflicts, some people believed they could prove their worth as Americans by signing up and hoped their service would be rewarded with equal rights after the war. Others felt they would be reinforcing a double standard by fighting in a war to free Cubans from Spanish oppression while they were denied equal treatment in the United States.[16] The remainder of the chapter discusses efforts by African American units to quell revolutionaries in the Philippines between 1899–1902 and 1906–1908, and the participation of Black soldiers in the Punitive Expedition to Mexico between 1916–1917.

While readers may have expected the author to concentrate on Black service members' experiences in the ranks and in formal campaigns, the author goes further by examining how race riots in the early twentieth century negatively

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[12] Smith and Zeidler, pp. 82-100.

[13] Smith and Zeidler, p. 82.

[14] Smith and Zeidler, pp. 92-3.

[15] Frank Schubert. 2001. "Buffalo Soldiers: Myths and Realities." *Army History*, No. 52 (Spring 2001), pp. 13-18. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26305152.

[16] Smith and Zeidler, p. 130.

affected the reputation of African Americans in the military.[17] Civilians and military authorities alike blamed Black soldiers for instigating these events. The author's attempt to underscore events like the Brownsville Riot and Houston Riot—and the inappropriate corporate punishments that accompanied them—provides a deeper awareness of how critically civil and military authorities regarded African American soldiers on the eve of WWI.

Chapter six, "World War I," centers around the activities of African American soldiers in the First World War and their experiences during the interwar years. While the four regular Black regiments (the 9th and 10th Cavalries, and the 24th and 25th Infantries) had gained suitable combat experience during their campaigns in the West, authorities forbid them from serving overseas. Because Army officials blamed members of the regular Black regiments for starting race riots in the United States, they thought that these regiments would cause trouble in Europe.[18] Consequently, in late 1917, the War Department created two new African American infantry regiments (the 92nd and 93rd), composed of new recruits and existing National Guardsmen. In the Army, Black soldiers had served in more diverse roles, participating in most areas except the pilot section of the Aviation Corps. For the first time, Black soldiers could also become officers[19] Ultimately, the chapter reinforces a theme that had become well-established by 1917: African Americans enlisted hoping that their participation would secure greater freedoms for themselves and other Black Americans but were met with resistance after the war.

The author dedicates a large portion of the chapter to the specific missions and combat accomplishments of Black service members overseas, especially the performance of the 92nd and 93rd Infantry regiments. This emphasis is understandable given the author's objective to document the wartime experience of Black soldiers. However, the chapter could have offered a larger discussion surrounding the African American military service during the interwar years. According to the author, this phase is not detailed in the report because the War Department drastically scaled back military opportunities for Black Americans in the 1920s and 1930s.[20] Additionally, the author does not discuss the significant role of African American WWI veterans in shaping the New Negro Movement, a civil rights movement based on "a renewed sense of racial pride, cultural self-expression, economic independence, and progressive politics."[21] Newer research, such as *Vanguards of the New Negro: African American Veterans and Post-World War I Racial Militancy* by Chad Williams, provides greater context on this movement. Many Black veterans became disillusioned when their military service did not grant them the democratic liberties for which they fought. As discrimination increased after the war, many Black veterans joined militant civil rights

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[17]Smith and Zeidler, pp. 141-3.

[18] Smith and Zeidler p. 158.

[19] Smith and Zeidler, pp. 155-6, 160-1.

[20] Smith and Zeidler, pp. 181-3.

[21] Library of Congress. n.d. "NAACP: A Century in the Fight for Freedom - The New Negro Movement." https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/naacp/the-new-negro-movement.html.

organizations.[22] While not always considered an official chapter of American military history, the activities of Black veterans in the interwar era further demonstrates how their military experience shaped the course of civil rights.

The seventh and eighth chapters outline the role of Black service members in WWII. Chapter seven, "African American Navy, Marine, Women's Reserves, and Coast Guard Service during World War II," discusses policy changes that granted greater opportunities to African Americans in those branches. This chapter demonstrates that WWII became a significant turning point for the advancement of African Americans in the Navy, Marines, and Coast Guard. The author points out that change did not originate within the military but began with efforts from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and pressure from President Roosevelt.[23] In 1941, E.O. No. 8802, which required every branch of the Armed Forces of the United States to allow all Americans opportunities for full participation, regardless of race helped enforce this change.[24] For example, the Marines began enlisting Black Americans for the first time as a consequence of E.O. 8802. By 1943, the Navy implemented a guide for the inclusion of Black personnel in equal roles, discouraged separate facilities, and allowed African Americans to receive officer commissions and operate vessels in wartime.[25] The Coast Guard quickly adapted to the new policies, and offered African Americans greater opportunities for advancement than any other military branch.[26] Beginning in 1942, the Navy and Coast Guard offered female Americans the opportunity to serve in the Women's Reserve Corps, the Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES) and Semper Paratus—Always Ready (SPARS), but did not allow African American women the chance to enlist until October 1944.[27]

Chapter eight, "African Americans in the United States Army during World War II," does not detail each Army unit in which Black Americans served, but outlines the trends that impacted their selection, training, and involvement in the Armed Forces of the United States. The chapter begins with a discussion of African American Army service during the 1920s and 1930s, stressing that their participation remained limited due to negative performance reviews by racist officers after WWI. As the other military branches had done, the Army readjusted its quotas for African American service members at the outset of WWII and eventually included a large number of African Americans into segregated units.

A valuable feature of chapter eight is the author's effort to highlight installations where Black service members received basic training for infantry, artillery, and

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[22] Chad L. Williams. 2007. "Vanguards of the New Negro: African American Veterans and Post-World War I Racial Militancy." *The Journal of African American History*, Vol. 92, No. 3 (Summer, 2007). pp. 347-370. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20064204.

[23] Smith and Zeidler, pp. 189-92.

[24] Smith and Zeidler p. 202.

[25] Smith and Zeidler p. 201

[26] Smith and Zeidler p. 209.

[27] Smith and Zeidler p. 211.

aviator instruction.[28] He demonstrates the importance of understanding the experience of African American soldiers at Army training installations and embarkation points. These locations embody the "physical as well as psychic spaces"[29] where Black service members learned how to contend against foreign enemies while contending against discrimination. However, although the author is attentive to the roles of African American men in the Army, he does not discuss the involvement of Black women in the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps (which later became the Women's Army Corps, or WACs). With African Americans comprising approximately ten percent of its forces, more Black women participated in the WACs than in any other branch.[30] The contributions of these service members, who performed in the midst of both racial and gender discrimination, warrant inclusion in any historic context describing the African American military experience.

Chapter nine, entitled "Victory and Context: Recognition of African American Contributions to American Military History," begins by discussing early attempts to grant African Americans full inclusion in the military after WWII. While officials made fragmented efforts toward integration after the war, it was not enforced until President Truman signed E.O. 9981 in 1948. This order called for an official end to segregation in the armed services.[31] To guarantee this outcome, the order established a national advisory committee (known as the Fahy Committee) to examine "the rules, procedures and practices of the armed services in order to determine in what respect such rules, procedures and practices may be altered or improved with a view to carrying out the policy of this order."[32] While the authors identify E.O. 9981 as the most important legal action to end segregation within the military, they acknowledge that desegregation took years to accomplish. The Secretary of Defense did not affirm that all segregated units had been decommissioned until 1954.[33]

The passage of E.O. 9981 reinforces the report's argument that the military was on the leading edge of the country's Civil Rights movement, and E.O. 9981 provided a legal precedent for desegregation in larger society. However, despite the significance of E.O. 9981, the author does not provide much discussion about the applied efforts that made military desegregation possible. A relatively detailed exposition addressing this phase of the African American military experience is found in chapter 11 of Donald McCoy and Richard Ruetten's book, *Quest and Response: Minority Rights and the Truman Administration* (1973), which outlines the important efforts of the Fahy Committee to enforce Truman's executive

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[28] Smith and Zeidler, pp. 226-233

[29] Ibid., p. 246.

[30] J. Chamberlin. March 12, 2020. "African American Women in the Military During WWII." National Archives Special Media Division. https://unwritten-record.blogs.archives.gov/2020/03/12/african-american-women-in-the-military-during-wwii/.

[31] Smith and Zeidler, p. 253.

[32] Harry S. Truman. 1948. "Executive Order 9981." Harry S. Truman Library. https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/executive-orders/9981/executive-order-9981.

[33] Smith and Zeidler, p. 253.

order.[34] McCoy and Ruetten's work also describes the integration process during the Korean War, which is often seen as a defining moment in the African American military experience. While recent research may offer new perspectives concerning integration between 1948 and 1954, McCoy and Ruetten's work provides a foundational source for detail that is largely absent from this historic context.

In the second half of chapter nine, the authors identify potential themes to interpret the significance of resources associated with African American military service. The authors create two broad categories into which the themes can be classified. The first category is for themes relating to societal attitudes and military policy toward African Americans and includes five themes: United States military policy and African American Soldiers, African American resistance to racist policies, the military as a leader in societal change, support from the African American community, and the martial spirit of African American Soldiers. The second category is for chronological themes and includes six themes: African American units and soldiers before the Civil War, African American units and soldiers in the Civil War, Buffalo Soldiers (1865-1897), African American soldiers from the Spanish American War to 1917, African American soldiers in World War I, and African American units in World War II and Korea.[35]

Also in chapter nine, the authors list relevant sites and buildings that are, or have the potential to be, eligible for the National Register for their association with the identified themes. The resources are organized by chronological themes from the pre-Civil War period through WWII. The authors acknowledged that there were few surviving resources associated with the African American experience in the pre-Civil War period because of the temporary nature of their construction. Today, modern scholarship, coupled with a greater awareness of African American military involvement, may reveal sites that were unknown at the time of publication. Additionally, while more resources survive from the period between the Civil War and the nineteenth century, most sites and buildings are not on land owned by the Department of Defense (DoD).[36] However, many resources associated with later events, such as World War I and II, are on property that is still owned by the DoD.[37] According to the authors, this became a key reason for expanding the time frame of the historic context through the end of military segregation.

In the historic context, the authors reference both primary and secondary sources. While they sometimes cite dated secondary sources, these sources are usually accompanied with more recent secondary literature. Although new scholarship may approach the topic of African American military service with greater nuance than the secondary sources cited in this report (many of which date from the mid or

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[34] Donald McCoy and Richard Ruetten. 1973. *Quest and Response: Minority Rights and the Truman Administration.* Lawrence: The University of Kansas Press. Chapter 11: "Integrating the Military." pp. 221-50.

[35] Smith and Zeidler, p. 255.

[36] Smith and Zeidler p. 266.

[37] Smith and Zeidler pp. 14, 298.

late twentieth century), this document still provides a useful framework through which a resource's significance can be understood.

According to the report's introduction, a section with general preservation and management suggestions for identified resources is supposed to be included before Appendix A. However, this portion of the report appears to be missing. The authors may have intended to write this section based on their fieldwork observations, but were unable to include it as planned due to the unexpected cut in funding. Appendix A contains a list of individuals who played a significant role in the African American military experience. Appendix B contains a list of Congressional Medal of Honor recipients (1863-1953) organized alphabetically by conflict. Both of these appendices are useful because historic resources associated with the productive period of a significant individual's life may be eligible for listing. Still, it is important to remember that the lists are a starting point and not comprehensive. For example, only one service member from the Women's Army Corps, Charity Adams, is listed.[38]

Before project funding halted, the authors had created and distributed a survey to determine which installations had historic resources associated with African American military service. The authors included the survey questionnaire and results in Appendices C and D of the report.[39] They distributed the survey to 99 installations in the fall of 1993. Of the 31 replies, most survey respondents stated that their installation did not contain (or they were not aware of) resources associated with African American military service. Notably, when the authors distributed this survey, recognition of Black service members in American military history and the resources associated with their enlistment was still in the early stages of scholarship. Without previous substantial investigation on this topic, it is possible that many installations had not yet recognized their historic connections with African American service members or associated resources. Some respondents indicated that cultural resource surveys were currently underway, while others explained that they were obtaining funding for such surveys.[40]

On the whole, this report successfully reviews 400 years of African American military history around the theme of peacetime exclusion, initial wartime exclusion, and limited wartime inclusion. Using primary and secondary sources, the authors pair old scholarship with more recent research. However, a few phases of the African American military experience are not discussed in this report and deserve further detail. Some topics that could be addressed in this report fall outside the traditional view of military history, but are worth covering because of their military and societal impact. For example, the role of Black WWI veterans in shaping the interwar New Negro Movement falls under this category. Other topics are directly related to the African American military experience but given little detail in this report, making it necessary to consult other literature on these subjects. These topics include the contributions of African American WACs in WWII and the

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[38] Smith and Zeidler, p. 316.

[39] Smith and Zeidler pp. 327, 328-334.

[40] Smith and Zeidler p. 333.

desegregation process following E.O. 9981. Still, the authors succeed in creating a broad foundation to evaluate the contributions of Black service members.

Link to the 1998 report:

https://denix.osd.mil/legacy/cr-legacy-project-deliverables/fy1998/fy1998/historic-context-for-the-african-american-military-experience-report-1998-legacy-98-1762/

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