



Courage in Full Color

Black Soldiers Get an Overdue Starring Role in the Cinematic Story of World War II

By Wil Haygood
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Inside the brick home on the corner sits a brave man. He once stalked Nazis across Italian hillsides, crunching through foot-high snow.

After his wife died, Joseph Stephenson moved in with his daughter here in Cheverly. He's in the living room, his tall body covering the navy blue recliner. Sunlight bounces off the hardwood floors. Three of his grandchildren are in another room, and their voices swoop around and over him like birds.

"Say what?"

The grandchildren have just called out to him about bolting for the local swimming pool.

"Okay, be careful," he yells out.

The old soldier is talking about the Germans and the bullets that came ricocheting down from the hills during the savage winter of 1944.

"The Italians were glad to see us," he says. "They were glad to see anybody pushing at the Germans."

Stephenson, 89, was a member of the highly praised, all-black 92nd Infantry Division. He was wounded that winter by a trip mine, and the explosion ripped into his thigh. He managed to come home, though, on his own two feet and carrying a Bronze Star. "For valor," he explains.

There followed years of raising his two kids and teaching high school. The old soldier attended many 92nd reunions -- black men striding through airports with canes and 92nd insignia. Cats talking about basic training and listening to [Duke Ellington](#) and [Hoagy Carmichael](#) because Duke and Hoagy had been thumping during their war.

So much bravery; so much blood.

Then the dying began again, and there were coast-to-coast funerals.

The history books and documentaries and motion pictures about World War II are mountain-high now. The collective cinematic and literary output trumps that of every other modern engagement, including Vietnam. World War II, with its epic heroes and generals and nuclear bombs, has carved its own canon.

But save for a cinematic footnote in 1949, the exploits of black soldiers like Stephenson have been missing in action on the big screen. In movie after movie -- "Saving Private Ryan," "Flags of Our Fathers," "Letters From [Iwo Jima](#)," "The Thin Red Line,"

"From Here to Eternity," "The Great Escape," "The Bridge on the River Kwai," "A Bridge Too Far," "Midway" -- there was hardly a black face upon the screen. By contrast, films inspired by Vietnam -- "Apocalypse Now," "Hamburger Hill" and "Platoon," to name just three -- featured integrated casts.

"You just came not to expect anything like that, films about us," Stephenson says.

A public brouhaha erupted at the [Cannes Film Festival](#) in May when director [Spike Lee](#) criticized [Clint Eastwood](#) for the underrepresentation of blacks in "Flags" and "Letters," both of which Eastwood directed. Eastwood, defending himself to London's Guardian, said there were no black soldiers involved in raising the flag on Iwo Jima, and that Lee "should shut his face." (Eastwood is correct about black soldiers not participating in the flag raising, but there were blacks on Iwo Jima who fought in the battle.)

"Blacks are not a part of the visual mythology of World War II," says Melton McLaurin, professor emeritus of history at the [University of North Carolina at Wilmington](#) and writer-director of a recent PBS film about the first black [Marines](#) who served in the war. "The national imagery begins in the Second World War with figures like [John Wayne](#) and [Robert Taylor](#) in the movies. Those films dealt with the white man's role. And that's the iconography that came out of that period.

"What is unconscionable about these World War II films is where the directors knew about black soldiers' participation and chose not to tip their hat to them," he says. "Eastwood does acknowledge that blacks were on Iwo Jima, but you only see a couple black soldiers for about five seconds."

It will soon change.

Lee's World War II drama, "Miracle at St. Anna," opens on the big screen in September following its premiere at the [Toronto International Film Festival](#) earlier in the month. It is based on James McBride's 2002 novel of the same name and chronicles the true-life adventures of Stephenson's 92nd Infantry.

And yet a World War II movie featuring black soldiers can hardly be just about war. The black soldier in World War II was engaged in two battles: proving his patriotism on the front lines and extracting dignity at home. Black Americans' experience of World War II featured heroism aplenty, but also race riots in half a dozen cities, marches upon the [White House](#) and the intervention of President and Mrs. Roosevelt on behalf of black soldiers. Even black heroes on the battlefield remained without honors for a long time.

"A lot of movie executives just didn't know the history," says Lee. "It never dawned on them that there was another component to the war."

Needed in War Effort

Even though blacks were treated as second-class citizens in the 1940s, the U.S. government considered their participation in the war effort important. The secretary of war had an aide for "Negro Affairs." There were also bond rallies, and black entertainers -- [Lena Horne](#) and Duke Ellington, among them -- were engaged to give patriotic speeches. Advertisements featuring black soldiers ran in black weekly newspapers.

Boxers [Joe Louis](#) and Sugar Ray Robinson both reported for duty. The Army sent them on a nationwide tour chatting up black and white soldiers in an effort to promote racial harmony.

The gun in the hand of the black man, however, frightened many politicians.

Southern politicians railed, sometimes from the halls of Congress itself, against integrating the armed forces. They had a powerful ally in Secretary of War Henry Stimson. While blacks went to war, the political hubbub kept them relegated to service jobs, at least in the beginning. Wanting to fight, they found themselves wielding frying pans.

"The nation cannot expect the colored people to feel that the U.S. is worth defending if they continue to be treated as they are now," first lady [Eleanor Roosevelt](#) said shortly after the outset of the war.

Against such a backdrop, racial strife erupted in various corners of America. Louis and Robinson's tour in 1943 gained publicity all right, but not always for reasons the Army intended. While on a base in Alabama, they refused to board a segregated bus. A scuffle with white military police officers erupted. While the two were not arrested, the fracas was picked up by the Negro press.

Also in 1943, a group of white shipyard workers making war materials refused to work alongside blacks. A fight broke out involving hammers and pieces of metal, and 11 blacks were hospitalized. Work eventually continued, but the black workers were kept at a distance from whites.

A white welder wrote a letter to the local Mobile (Ala.) Register expressing his dismay: "We realize the fact that they are human beings, [but] we don't any more want to work or want our women to work alongside a Negro than you would want to take one into your dining room and sit him down between your wife and mother to eat dinner, or for your wife to invite the cook in for a game of bridge, or take her to the movies."

In time, black war heroes emerged. One of the first was Dorie Miller, a mess attendant aboard the USS West Virginia during the attack at [Pearl Harbor](#). Miller, who was forbidden to operate weapons, grabbed hold of an antiaircraft gun and brought down two Japanese planes.

"He was actually the first hero of World War II," says Gail Buckley, author of "American Patriots: The Story of Blacks in the Military From the Revolution to Desert Storm." "The military did not release his name to the public until March of 1942. They had looked for a white hero. There was outrage from the black press." Miller became the first black man to win the Navy Cross.

In addition to Miller, there would be others:

In Italy on Dec. 26, 1944, 1st Lt. [John Fox](#) -- a member of the 92nd -- was surrounded by Germans. He directed American forces to fire from their planes, even though they warned him he wouldn't be safe. Fox replied it was the only way to stop the German advance. His body was found along with the dead German soldiers.

In Germany on March 23, 1945, a wounded Staff Sgt. Edward Carter trudged alone across an enemy battlefield and delivered two prisoners of war.

"There was Vernon Baker, of course," says Joseph Stephenson.

Second Lt. Baker crawled to an enemy position in Italy on April 5 and 6, 1945. He single-handedly killed a dozen German soldiers.

But no black soldiers received the Medal of Honor during World War II.

"I knew we fought well," says Stephenson, who now lives with his daughter, [Jolene Ivey](#), a state delegate. "We just didn't get credit for it."

Countering the Hollywood Myth

James McBride had a huge success with his memoir, "The Color of Water," about his Jewish mother raising her biracial children. Afterward, he began thinking about his father's brothers, who had regaled him when he was a child with stories about The War.

These were stories from an unknown world, far different from what he remembered on the TV screen as a child. "I grew up seeing the Great White Soldier on TV in shows like 'The Rat Patrol,' " he says of the TV series that premiered in 1966.

McBride began to track down the soldiers of the 92nd, old men whom he'd visit for hours. He moved on to Italy and tracked down old Italian soldiers and villagers who remembered "the colored troops." He did the historical research but clothed it all in a novel. "The 92nd was an experiment to see if the Negro soldier could fight," says McBride. "Although the word 'experiment' is a misnomer because blacks fought since Crispus Attucks." (Attucks was a colonial-era runaway slave who died battling the British in Boston in 1770.)

McBride says he wrote "Miracle" to draw attention to an overlooked part of American history. "I hoped I could throw a toothpick into the hurricane of Hollywood mythology regarding how black people are viewed historically," he says.

McBride was particularly drawn to William J. McCaffrey, division chief of staff of the 92nd Infantry Division. McCaffrey's son, Barry, is the retired four-star general familiar on news programs for his military analysis.

"Dad used to say he was the white liberal West Point grad that was there to balance the Southern white officers who commanded the division," says [Barry McCaffrey](#).

McCaffrey grew up hearing his father talk about the heroism displayed by soldiers of the 92nd. "As a high school kid, Dad took me to Italy and we followed the route of the 92nd up along the Italian coast. The 92nd, nicknamed the Buffalo division after the Buffalo Soldiers, had one of the highest individual records for valor for units in combat. It saw extremely difficult battles along the west coast of Italy."

A fan of the film "Glory," which highlighted the heroics of a black military unit during the Civil War ("I've seen it at least 15 times, and it still brings tears to my eyes"), McCaffrey says Hollywood has missed out on opportunities to showcase the black soldier from World War II. Even the famed Tuskegee Airmen were only the subject of a cable TV movie in 1995.

"As much as America might be ashamed to say it," McCaffrey says, "the blacks were exploited for so many years. And there is a lens into celluloid where the black soldier's bravery has been underrepresented. But even as I say that I must also add that today, I think, the military's record in diversity and integration is second to none."

"The fact that Spike Lee is telling the story of the 92nd is great," Lt. Gen. Lloyd Austin says on the phone from Iraq. Austin, who is black and a West Point graduate, is commander of the multinational corps in Iraq -- the second-highest-ranking [American military](#) official in the country. "Everyone in the service can look at those soldiers in the 92nd and say they are a model of patriotism. They just were not given a lot of credit at the time for what they did."

Hurdles to the Silver Screen

Though Hollywood considered the issue of race taboo in the 1940s and 1950s, occasionally there was a breakthrough.

In 1945, [Arthur Laurents](#) saw his play, "Home of the Brave," premiere on Broadway. The three-act drama told the story of a Jewish soldier in World War II and the prejudice he faced. The drama was critically lauded, and it drew the interest of Stanley Kramer, a movie producer who had socially progressive views.

In the 1949 screen version, the protagonist was not Jewish but a Negro. He was played by actor James Edwards. And if there is any figure who haunts Hollywood's portrayal of black soldiers, it is Edwards.

Kramer could make the film he wished because he had formed an independent production company. As well, he made his cast and crew swear to secrecy during filming because he feared studio interference given the film's explosive subject matter. Edwards played Peter Moss, a soldier who suffers a mental breakdown because of racial antagonism in his infantry unit.

Edwards was a handsome man, but film roles for blacks, handsome or otherwise, were minimal in the 1940s. They were also fraught with stereotype. But with "Home of the Brave" a critical hit, many imagined Edwards's career might gain traction. Scripts were indeed sent to him, but they made him wince.

"He could have played in a lot more movies than he did, but the roles were stereotypical," says [Fred Edwards](#), James's brother.

Still, his performance in "Home" made Edwards an inspiration to many black actors. The young [Sidney Poitier](#) considered him a role model. Edwards never again headlined a major motion picture but found small roles in TV and films. Then came the McCarthy witch hunts, which scarred him because of his labor activities and his refusal to repudiate activist Paul Robeson.

"A lot of hate built up inside him," Fred says. To earn money, Edwards turned to operating a dude ranch on the outskirts of Los Angeles. He had white actor friends who tried to keep his spirits afloat, among them Lloyd Bridges, his co-star in "Home of the Brave." "Lloyd was like a brother to him," says Fred Edwards.

Edwards was proud to finally get another script with some heft; it was 1970's "Patton," and George C. Scott had already been cast as Gen. George S. Patton Jr. However, Edwards quickly became dismayed: His role required him to play a military valet to Patton. Edwards took the role because he needed the money.

Edwards moved to San Diego after the filming of "Patton." In her autobiography, "Diahann!," Diahann Carroll recalled seeing him on Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood: "I suppose he was afraid I'd flaunt my success in his face. But I planted myself in his path, gave him a big hug, and insisted he stop to talk. I was devastated by his looks. The alcohol had ravaged him, and he seemed very sad and defeated. Yet he was still quite beautiful, and much more soft and gentle than the James I had known."

A few months later, Edwards died of a heart attack. He was 51 years old.

Clout Long in Coming

Hollywood would mostly ignore black figures on-screen -- with the exception of Sidney Poitier and [Harry Belafonte](#) -- until the 1970s era of the so-called black exploitation film. A black actor with clout might well have gotten a big-budget period film featuring blacks off the ground earlier, but even the 1980s and 1990s were cold periods for black actors in Hollywood. (In 2001, [Denzel Washington](#) and [Halle Berry](#) both won Best Actor Oscars, a seminal moment in Hollywood history.)

Lee's battles with Hollywood have been long and exhausting. He got his "[Malcolm X](#)" 1992 biopic made after a long struggle. He thought that after the box office hit "Inside Man," his 2006 heist film starring Washington, [Clive Owen](#) and [Jodie Foster](#), that he wouldn't have to badger the studio money crunchers again.

"I was coming off my biggest hit ever," he says, referring to "Inside Man."

But he still had difficulty getting financing for "Miracle." "I deluded myself in thinking it was going to be a little easier," he says. "I woke up quick."

Nonetheless, "we've been blessed," Lee says. "James wrote a great novel. And I've been going to Italy since 1986. I grew up liking World War II films very much."

He goes on: "These black soldiers were fighting Nazis and also Jim Crow back home. That's one of the things I really paid attention to when talking to these veterans. They are very patriotic. They're going to stand up and cheer when they see the brothers dealing with the Nazis."

Overdue Commendations

In 1993, the Army employed historically black Shaw University in Raleigh, N.C., to look into medal disparities during World War II. Eventually, President [Bill Clinton](#) presented the Medal of Honor to seven black Army veterans in a White House ceremony in 1997:

Second Lt. Vernon Baker.

Staff Sgt. Edward Carter Jr.

First Lt. John Fox.

Pfc. Willy James Jr.

Staff Sgt. Ruben Rivers.

Maj. Charles Thomas.

Pvt. George Watson.

All, save 77-year-old Baker, had died.

So much blood; so much bravery.

Baker -- who had mowed down a dozen Nazis single-handedly -- heard the applause wash over him after his citation was read. "The only thing that I can say to those who are not here with me is: 'Thank you, fellows, well done. And I will always remember you,' " he said.

And then the old soldier went home.