

Blacks in WWII

From the movie “Miracle at St. Anna” that Spike Lee produced about a black regiment in Europe a few years ago, there is not a lot out there to the general public about the role blacks played in the war. For that matter not much is written about the Asians groups either, such as the group that Daniel Inouye (the distinguish Senator from Hawaii) was a part of—the 442nd Regiment Combat Team, and all Japanese unit, who fought bravely in Italy and would come to be the most decorated single combat unit of its size, with 8 Presidential distinguished unit citations and over 18,000 individual decorations. As I’m sure most of you know, the service wasn’t integrated in WWII.

That was the same for the nurses in the service. The Army Nurse Corps didn’t start accepting black nurses until 1941, even though they had served in WWI and then they only let a limited number in. By the end of the war, only a little over 500 African American women had been allowed to serve. Some served in the states, others went to the Pacific, Africa, or England and they treated mostly black soldiers.

Interesting bit of news here: The blood supply was segregated as well. Blood taken from African Americans was labeled “A” and could only be given to black soldiers. And black soldiers were not allowed to use blood donated from whites.

In my story I mention that Lilly Mae’s boyfriend, Joseph, is in the Army. He is in a unit that is working on building a road from the states to Alaska. The US government was afraid if Japan launched a full-fledged attack on Alaska, we would be a poor position to supply a counter force with no land access. Japan did attack the Aleutian Islands. Six months after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the Japanese bombed Dutch Harbor on Unalaska Island and occupied the Aleutian islands of Attu and Kiska. These islands were retaken in May and August of 1943. I fudged this a bit related to timing. The Army started work on this road in March of 1942 and it was completed in October of that same year, though it was not useable for regular vehicles until 1943. From what I can tell, after the road was complete the Army turned it over to civilian contractors to make it useable for regular vehicle traffic. I don’t know what unit Joseph would have been in (there were three black regiments that were in on the construction, one being the 95th). More of that information will come in book III!

There were not many black units in the service that actually saw combat. Most

were kept state side or worked on the support end of a unit, as stewards on ships or submarines, working in the kitchen and in the ammunitions areas.

There was a black tank battalion, the 761st, who fought under Patton. Some of the Tuskegee Airman did go overseas on the Mariposa with the 95th Evacuation Hospital staff and they were segregated from them as I mention in my story. They were given this name because their training took place in Tuskegee, Alabama. On January 16th, 1941 the Air Corps was first opened to blacks. The first class started in June, 1941. Of the 13 men in that first class, only 5 graduated. There were more to follow.

Because they were black, they were not allowed to enter into the war until June of 1943, so these men had many more hours in the air at home than their white counterparts. These men also fought long after their white counterparts were rotated home. Most white pilots went home after 50 missions. There were not enough blacks pilots trained for this to happen for the Tuskegee Airman. For example, Walter Palmer was not sent home until he had flown 158 missions.