

# AMERICAN TROOPS IN WORLD WAR II



I can describe the makeup, training, and experiences of the American troops in WWII..

**Who made up the American fighting force during World War II? Read on, highlight or underline important information, interact with the text, and find out the story behind the diverse men and women of the American military. If you have any additional questions as you read, note them right on the reading – and the seek the answers!**

The Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor with the expectation that once Americans had experienced Japan's power, they would shrink from further conflict. The day after the raid, the Japan Times boasted that the United States, now reduced to a third-rate power, was "trembling in her shoes." But if Americans were trembling, it was with rage, not fear. Uniting under the battle cry "Remember Pearl Harbor," they set out to prove Japan wrong.

## **THE SELECTIVE SERVICE AND THE GI**

After Pearl Harbor, eager young Americans jammed the recruiting offices. "I wanted to be a hero, let's face it," admitted Roger Tuthrup. *"I was havin' trouble in school. ...The war'd been goin' on for two years. I didn't wanna miss it. ...I was an American. I was seventeen."* Even the 5 million who volunteered for military service, however, were not enough to face the challenge of an all-out war on two global fronts - Europe and the Pacific. The Selective Service System instituted the draft and eventually provided another 10 million soldiers to meet the armed forces' needs. Richard Leacock, who came to America from the Canary Islands to go to Harvard, recalls, *"You couldn't volunteer unless you were a citizen. ...When they drafted me in my senior year I was delighted. ...I can't say that going to Harvard is a democratic process. Going into the army certainly was."*

To join the military, you had to be 17 years old, at least five feet tall, and 105 pounds. Calvin Graham managed to sneak into the Navy when he was only 12 and won a Bronze Star and Purple Heart before the Navy realized he was underage and sent him home. When he was the legal age, he re-enlisted. Other boys, though none so young, also managed to sneak into the military before they were eligible.

Of course, not everyone was anxious to fight. In the first few years of the draft, married men were exempt, so many rushed to get married, especially if they had already been in a relationship. After Pearl Harbor, however, the draft board became suspicious of "quickie" marriages. Fathers were also spared service until the end of 1943, when the need for manpower outweighed the desire to keep families together.

The volunteers and draftees reported to military bases around the country for eight weeks of basic training. In this short period, seasoned sergeants did their best to turn raw recruits into disciplined, battle-ready GIs. (The term GI - meaning "Government Issue" - first applied to government-issued uniforms, weapons, and supplies but soon was used to describe soldiers as well.) According to Sergeant Deb Myers, however, there was more to basic training than teaching a recruit how to stand at attention, march in step, handle a rifle, and follow orders. *"The civilian went before the Army doctors, took off his clothes, feeling silly; jigged, stooped, squatted, wet into a bottle; became a soldier. He learned how to sleep in the mud, tie a knot, kill a man. He learned the ache of loneliness, the ache of exhaustion, the kinship of misery. He learned that men make the same queasy noises in the morning, feel the same longings at night; that every man is alike and that each man is different."*



W. EUGENE SMITH/TIME LIFE PICTURES/GETTY

## **WOMEN IN THE MILITARY**

At the outset of the war, women served in the military only as nurses. They were under military rule, but they enjoyed none of the advantages of higher pay, rank, or benefits. When the war started, and women began agitating for a role in the war, the War Department looked for a way to keep them at arm's length. The solution was to create the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAACs), which initially had only 727 members.

When the women continued to complain that they were not only being shunted aside but given lower pay and benefits than the men, Army Chief of Staff General George Marshall finally stepped in. Marshall pushed for the formation of a Women's Auxiliary Army Corps (WAAC). "*There are innumerable duties now being performed by soldiers that can actually be done better by women,*" Marshall said in support of a bill to establish the WAAC. "*I want a women's corps right away, and I don't want any excuses,*" he ordered. Under this bill, women volunteering for the army would not receive the same rank, pay, or benefits as men doing the same jobs, nor could they expect to make the army a career.

Even so, the bill ran into fierce opposition in Congress. "*Take women into the armed services...*," asked one congressman, and "*who then will do the cooking, the washing, the mending?*" Another representative scorned the bill as "*the silliest piece of legislation*" he had ever seen. "*A woman's army to defend the United States of America,*" he raged. "*Think of the humiliation. What has become of the manhood of America, that we have to call on our women to do what has ever been the duty of men?*"



Despite this opposition, the bill establishing the WAAC became law on May 15, 1942. When Oveta Culp Hobby, a Texas newspaper executive and the first director of the WAAC, put out a call for recruits a few weeks later, more than 13,000 women applied on the first day applications were available. The Women's Army Corps (WACs) was then established under the leadership of Colonel Oveta Culp Hobby. Before taking command, Hobby, the wife of the former governor of Texas, had been the chief of the Women's Interest Section in the Public Relations Bureau of the War Department.

Women also had a series of groups in the Air Force, which ultimately became the Women's Air Force Service Pilots (WASPs). The Navy had the Women Accepted for Voluntary Service (WAVES), and the Coast Guard employed the SPARs (from the motto, *Semper Paratus*, always ready). Though they didn't get a special force with a clever name, nearly 20,000 women also served in the marines.

Only a tiny percentage of the 216,000 women in these forces, perhaps a total of 10,000, were allowed to serve overseas. The 669th Headquarters Platoon was the Army's first experiment with a female unit in the field. Assigned to Lieutenant General Mark Clark's Fifth Army, the women traveled throughout Italy performing mostly clerical tasks in the group headquarters.

Only the most qualified women got these "plum" positions, which took them everywhere from the Pacific to Europe to Africa, but the jobs were almost always clerical. Those stateside performed a broader array of tasks, from clerical and administrative to weather forecasters, cryptographers, radio operators, parachute riggers, aerial-photograph analysts, and control-tower operators. A tremendous surge of public hostility toward the WAACs emerged in 1943 as soldiers began to complain about real and imagined problems with the women. Reports were circulated about the loose morals of the female soldiers. The WAACs survived and were merged into the WACs in July 1943. Women were given the choice of joining the Army or going back to civilian life, and one-fourth chose the second option.

After the war, Colonel Hobby received the Distinguished Service Medal and 62 WACs received the Legion of Merit for exceptionally meritorious conduct in the performance of duty. A total of 657 women received medals and citations. When the war ended, all but about 10,000 WACs returned to their homes. Despite political opposition, the Congress voted in 1948 to make the WACs a permanent part of the army. In 1978, women were allowed to join the regular army, and it was no longer necessary to have a separate corps.

## **MINORITIES IN THE ARMED SERVICES**

The United States has long been the most diverse country on earth — our slogan *E Pluribus Unum* proclaims that out of many people we are one nation. But we have frequently had trouble living up to this ideal. The Second World War provided an unprecedented chance for African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, Filipinos, Chinese Americans, Jewish Americans, Japanese Americans, and other minorities, to break the restraints and limitations of the past, and for the first time participate fully in American life. The war also created new dilemmas for members of different ethnic groups during the war. Restricted to racially segregated neighborhoods and reservations and denied basic citizenship rights, some members of these groups questioned whether this was their war to fight. "Why die for democracy for some foreign country when we don't even have it here?" asked an editorial in an African-American newspaper. On receiving his draft notice, an African American responded unhappily, "*Just carve on my tombstone, 'Here lies a black man killed fighting a yellow man for the protection of a white man.'*"

## **AFRICAN AMERICAN SOLDIERS**

Early on in the war, African Americans adopted the concept of a "Double Victory" — the idea of winning the war abroad while at the same time fighting for civil rights at home. This would not be the easiest goal to accomplish. As on the home front, African Americans faced various forms of discrimination in the military. At the onset of the war, only 4,000 blacks were in the military, only a dozen of whom were officers. In the first draft, only 2,000 African Americans were chosen. However, over 10,000 enlisted to serve by the start of the war. Black soldiers but generally not assigned to combat, and confined to segregated units. Even their blood banks were segregated — an ironic fact, considering the doctor who developed the idea of blood transfusions, Charles Drew, was African American. There were voices in the government who urged integration, such as Judge William Hastie, Roosevelt's adviser on Negro affairs, but the military objected. Only after the war were the barriers broken down.

More than a million African Americans joined the military to serve in the conflict, and did what they could to make the best of the difficult situation. Problems began as early as basic training. Many black draftees from the North, sent to training camps in the deep South, encountered Jim Crow laws for the first time. There were frequent and sometimes bloody confrontations between black servicemen and white civilians, black troops and white ones — over women and local customs and equal access to military facilities. African American soldiers discovered their army meal tickets would not be accepted; they would not be served in restaurants that freely fed German or Italian prisoners. In some towns, African-American soldiers were jailed. A few were lynched.



Once trained and deployed, most African Americans were relegated to service and support duties, regardless of their qualifications. African Americans made up half of the Transportation Corps in the European theater, including the members of the "Red Ball Express," the enormous convoy system that supplied Allied forces moving through Europe following the invasion of Normandy. Black troops were assigned to build air bases, clear mines, and feed the troops, and to the unpleasant job of graves registration — identifying and burying the dead. Such tasks were essential to victory, and often terribly dangerous, but rarely afforded the glory connected with frontline combat. Black soldiers were not sent to the front until late in the war, after heavy casualties had forced their use.

World heavyweight boxing champion Joe Louis was at Fort Riley, Kansas, where he met a future sports legend, Jackie Robinson. Robinson had already had a dazzling track, football, and baseball career in college, but he had not yet made history with the Brooklyn Dodgers. Even before breaking the color barrier in baseball, he had to break another after being turned down for officer training school. After Louis intervened on his behalf, Robinson got into the program. He landed back at Fort Riley as a morale officer. While riding on a bus at Fort Hood, Texas, Robinson was told to move to the back and reputedly threatened the driver. He was brought before an army court-martial and acquitted. He received an honorable discharge as a first lieutenant in 1944. Louis, meanwhile, fought more than 100 exhibition matches during the war.

The black women who served in World War II also were segregated. Even among the WAACs, the 40 black women in the officer training school were kept in a separate platoon and were not allowed to use many of the base facilities. When they became officers, the black women were assigned to all-black units. Black women were not given an overseas assignment until February 1945. Then 800 women were stationed first in Birmingham, England, and later Paris.

Their job was to help ensure that mail reached American servicemen in the European theater.

In 1925, the Army War College conducted a study that found blacks could never be pilots because they lacked intelligence and were too cowardly in combat. Yancy Williams, a Howard University student, sued the government to be allowed to become an aviation cadet. "Can you imagine," Lieutenant Colonel Herbert Carter said, "with the war clouds as heavy as they were over Europe, a citizen of the United States would have to sue his government to be accepted to train so he could fly and fight and die for his country?"

The Air Force subsequently agreed in November 1941 to set up a pilot training center for blacks in Alabama's Tuskegee Institute, which turned into the home base for the Tuskegee Airmen. The original instructors were white, but they didn't treat their cadets any differently than they would white trainees.

Three other all-black squadrons were later added to the original 99th Fighter Squadron to create the 332nd Fighter Group of the 15th Air Force. Operating mostly in Italy, the Tuskegee Airmen shot down 251 enemy planes and logged more than 15,000 sorties. None of the bombers they escorted was ever shot down. The Germans called them "Schwartzte Vogelmenschen", the Black Birdmen. About 1,000 men trained at Tuskegee; 45 were sent overseas for combat duty. The 332nd lost 66 men and had 33 taken prisoner. Among the 850 awards the group won were 150 Distinguished Flying Crosses, 8 Purple Hearts, 14 Bronze Stars, and 744 Air Medals. Ben Davis, Jr. went on to become the first black air force general. Another airman, General Chappie James, became America's first black four-star general in 1975.



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

## **HISPANIC AMERICANS**

Mexican Americans faced heavy discrimination on the home front, including job challenges, wage disparities, and racial tensions. Discrimination didn't prevent the US from drafting over 300,000 Hispanics, and at least a half million Mexican Americans joined the armed forces. Because they were incorporated into the general military population and served mostly in integrated units, the armed forces did not keep a separate count of their enlistment, and we will never know the exact number of Latinos who served. Like so many of their fellow Americans serving in the war, Latinos more than proved their courage and dedication in battle.

Hispanic Americans saw some discrimination in the armed forces, but persevered in their own push for a "Double V." "I think it was little Texas in the Marine Corps and as you know Texans and Mexicans ... weren't exactly bosom buddies in those days," Mexican-American Marine Bill Lansford remembered. "As the war advanced and we went on through, these southern guys began seeing that we weren't what they thought we were. And we began seeing that they weren't what we thought they were. And being Marines was kind of a melting pot, and we all got together. It was like a mini-United States, you know, where you got Jews, you got Italians, you got Indians — and they all learn to live together."

## **ASIAN AMERICANS**

Japanese Americans faced discrimination in the military as well as on the home front. After Pearl Harbor, all Japanese-American men of draft age, except those already in the armed forces, were classified as 4-C, enemy aliens, forbidden to serve their country. Then, in early 1943, Washington reversed its policy on military service. The Japanese government had been making effective propaganda in Asia out of the internment of Japanese Americans in the U.S.; the camps appeared to confirm their depiction of the war as a racial conflict. To respond to the Japanese propaganda, and under pressure from Japanese American and civil liberties organizations, President Roosevelt authorized the enlistment of Japanese-American men into the U.S. Armed Forces.

A battalion of Japanese Americans from Hawaii was allowed to go to Europe in 1943. The following year, that group became part of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, one of the most highly decorated units in the war, which consisted entirely of Japanese-Americans. In October 1944, the unit was sent to rescue a group of soldiers surrounded by Germans in southern France. It was so cold, soldiers would shoot at the enemy and then put their wet gloves on the hot barrel to keep warm. The rescue operation succeeded in saving 211 men from the so-called Lost Battalion. The cost was dear, however, with the 442nd suffering 800 casualties. One infantryman who lost an arm was Daniel Inouye, who has served as a Democratic senator from Hawaii since 1962. At war's end, the "Purple Heart Battalion" had suffered 9,486 casualties. Over 600 made the ultimate sacrifice. The 442nd earned more than 18,000 medals for valor and nearly 10,000 Purple Hearts – the most highly decorated (per person) division of American troops in the conflict.



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

When asked why he served with such intensity, one member of the 442nd said *"My priority was to try to show the American people that we are just as loyal as everyone else."* That loyalty was constantly questioned, however, even after the war. But on returning home, Japanese-American soldiers found many of the old prejudices remained. Veterans of the 442nd were denied service, even while in uniform. Some seven years after the war, Susumu Satow took his family to a restaurant in his hometown of Sacramento. They ordered their meal, but it never arrived. *"There's no point in making any commotion and so we just walked out,"* he said.



## **NATIVE AMERICANS**

Some 45,000 Native Americans enlisted in the armed services, too, including 800 women - a figure equal to more than ten percent of the Indian population at the time. Their willingness to serve led The Saturday Evening Post magazine to comment, *"We would not need the Selective Service if all volunteered like Indians."* For many Native Americans, the war provided their first opportunity to leave the reservation and meet non-Indians. A Chippewa wrote a poem describing his experience fighting with soldiers from very different backgrounds: *"We bind each other's wounds and eat the same ration. We dream of our loved ones in the same nation."*

Navajo "Code Talkers," whose ranks exceeded 400 during the course of the war, served in all six Marine divisions. The Code Talkers' primary job was to transmit confidential information in their native dialect in order to communicate tactics, troop movements, orders and other vital battlefield information via telegraphs and radios. Nobody outside of the Navajos themselves could understand their language, and the Code Talkers took advantage of their unique linguistic skills to provide a critical tactical advantage to the Marines.

## **TRAINING**

Unlike the professional armies of Germany and Japan, the armed forces that young American men rushed to join after Pearl Harbor had been totally unprepared to wage a world war. In 1940, the U.S. Army had been smaller than that of Rumania: only 174,000 men in uniform, wearing tin hats and leggings issued during World War I, and carrying rifles designed in 1903. The Army still owned tens of thousands of cavalry horses.

Once accepted in the armed forces the men were soon on their way to basic training. The goal of basic training was to turn undisciplined boys into fighting men whose comradeship and loyalty to their unit would help them withstand the worst that battle had to offer. Eugene Sledge recalled that *"Basic training often started with newcomers exiting a bus with their cheap suitcases and filing into the barracks for breakfast with a serenade of 'You'll be sorreee!' from every Marine not in formation that they passed."*

Soldiers found they would be sorry, at least at first. They had numbers, not names, now. Their heads were shaved. They were stripped of civilian clothing and personal belongings; everything except their wallets was tagged and sent home. Naked, they stood in line and were issued new shirts and pants and socks and underwear and a canvas seabag into which all these items and more had to be precisely folded. They were given a pair of dress shoes, too, and a steel bucket filled with toilet articles and a sewing kit, for all of which they were charged \$25 -- \$4 more than they were to be paid a month.



*"I was eighteen. I was real young," Walter Thompson said. "I had been away to college for about, I don't know, seven months before I was drafted, and coming into an environment where all these adult men were different walks of life. You didn't know who what or where. And for the first one or two nights you were just scared to death until you become accustomed to the environment that you are around. And I ... I actually cried the first night, because I was scared, you know. Strangers. I never saw any of those guys in my life and all walks of life, all sizes and all shapes. Lonely for your parents, your home, your friends. No one in the barracks that I knew. And so it was just an eerie feeling to be in that situation."*

*"The training was very difficult," Bill Lansford said. After Pearl Harbor, he volunteered for Carlson's Raiders, an elite Marine commando unit, and trained for guerilla warfare. "[The drill instructor] started us by walking because he knew we were going to have to walk or run wherever we went. And in the mornings before breakfast we might go for a 10-mile hike. Eventually a 20-mile hike. And they would give you maybe raw food and you had to learn how to cook it. Once a week we would have to go out and hunt our food or else we would go hungry. He concentrated on anything that was close combat like knife-fighting, fighting without any weapons and he armed us with automatic weapons, so that every squad had the fire power of potentially of a section or a platoon in an ordinary Marine unit."*

Everything was under the control of the drill instructor (DI), a veteran sergeant whose loud bellow was the first thing the men heard when they flipped on the barracks light at 4:45 a.m. and continued unabated until evening mess call (when his equally loud assistant picked up the slack). When an unauthorized box of cookies arrived, baked by some boot's fond but oblivious mother, the DI confiscated it, ordered the platoon to stand at attention, then made the men watch as he ate the cookies one by one. *"Our natural human rebelliousness," Phillips wrote, "was being removed and replaced with unquestioned obedience to orders."* Boot camp ended with two rugged weeks on the rifle range, with recruits shivering in tents at night and spending hour after maddening daylight hour struggling to master their weapons.



They were also being indoctrinated about the evils of the enemy. *"We had lots of training films about that," Miller said. "Showing us how bad the enemy was, how evil and so forth, and we'd learned about the same thing happening in World War I, so I think we were all quite cynical about these. We thought, these are training films. It's an awful lot of propaganda and baloney."* New experiences abounded as recruits and draftees were drilled in hand-to-hand combat, consisting mainly of judo and knife fighting. They learned survival techniques. And, for most, they discovered that there was a world outside their own.

To some like Sam Hynes, training was the shortest path to adulthood. *"Growing up is a series of tests, inevitably," he said. "Motivated partly by curiosity, about what it's like to do things that grownups do that you've never done before. And partly, a series of tests of your readiness to be an adult, I think. That you, by passing the tests, you earn admission to this class of people that you think all know what they're doing and are adults."*

## **COMBAT**

More than 16 million Americans served in the armed forces during the war. Fewer than a million ever saw serious combat. The infantry represented just 14 percent of the troops overseas. But wherever they fought – in North Africa or the South Pacific or Western Europe — the infantry bore the brunt of the fighting on the ground — and seven out of ten suffered casualties.

Those in the infantry — in the Army and Marines — endured hardships and horrors for which no training could ever have prepared them. The infantry was the workhorse of the military, not only faced with battling the enemy but also often asked to do physical labor at the front lines transporting the food, clothing, weapons and medicine needed to win the war. They experienced the war as no one else did.

The war was fought from the air, on the ground and at sea but all who saw combat — all who fought and killed no matter which branch of service — would never forget it. *“It’s like the state of being perpetually excited without any outlet,”* Paul Fussell said. *“And perpetually frightened without any outlet for it. And you have to depend entirely upon your quickness of spirit. If you see something over there out of the corner of your eye, and it’s not supposed to be there, you have to be quicker than that person is at leaping up and shooting him. And he’s going to do the same to you. So being alert and being quick all the time is very important. I hadn’t realized that much in training but I did after the first week on the line.”*



*“One thing about warfare that you sooner or later begin to realize, and that is the abnormal has now become the norm,”* Ray Leopold said. *“And things that were never considered as part of your life now are an everyday occurrence in that life, and you had either adapt or fall out of life.”*

No two men reacted to the experience in precisely the same way. *“Basically, getting shot at or shelled is just plain scary,”* Tom Galloway said. *“You just hope that it misses you. When the artillery’s coming in, you think, ‘Oh, God, it’s covering such an area and I hope it doesn’t hit me. I wish they would just start using rifles.’ You know, when you get to where a bullet whizzes by your head, that’s personal. You better get out of the way.”*

*“While we were out there, all through the war from when I first went out ‘til I got back, you never knew from one moment to the next whether you were going to get torpedoed and sunk or shot or what,”* Maurice Bell said. *“Especially when we got around these islands and they were actually firing back. And our ship was hit several times by bullets from these islands where they were firing back at us. So we just never knew from one moment to the next whether it was your time. We were just hoping.”*

*“Dying is different for pilots, for aviation personnel,”* Sam Hynes said. *“On the ground, in the infantry, there’s a corpse. It might be blown apart, but there’s a foot or an arm or something. And it’s very close. In aviation, the planes tend to go away and not come back. Even if someone dies in the air with you, it is hit, the plane explodes, it falls to the ground at a place where you’ll never see. I had a number of friends killed during the war but I never saw any of their bodies.”*

Some soldiers kept going by focusing on the direct tasks at hand. *“The sheer terror of knowing that the next one is going to have your name on it, when that goes on and on and on and on, you get a strange feeling in which you seem to become detached and you just think, well maybe this will end and maybe it won’t and maybe we’ll all be blown up and maybe we won’t, but who cares,”* Sidney Phillips said. *“And you learn to sort of live with it. It is just a matter of fate. You will either survive if the Lord is willing or you will not. So there’s really nothing you can do. And you just take it.”*

Many men eventually snapped under the stress. *“Combat exhaustion is like a walking away from the reality,”* Leopold said. *“They have given up. They seemed to be staring into space. They don’t seem to be able to respond to conversation you are trying to have with them. There is a basic approach that you can use with them. If the circumstance is such that you can give them some coffee, and talk to them, briefly at least, that could help. Sometimes if you gave them a sharp slap across the face, this could bring them back to where you are and what you are doing at the moment and what the reality is around you.”*

Humor helped many soldiers cope. *“I think the American ability to laugh and American humor is what*



carried us through a whole lot of the Pacific war," Phillips said. "Because Americans will make light of almost any bad situation. And Americans will find humor in almost anything." But humor could not ease every situation. In addition to battling random violence, terror and brutality, men had to find ways to cope with the act of killing.

"The fact is, I wasn't killing people," Walter Ehlers said. "I was killing the enemy. I wasn't trained to kill people. I was trained to kill the enemy. So, you know, that's a different perspective. You don't think of them as people; you think of them as the enemy, and that's the way you have to do it, because otherwise it would drive you nuts." "You would think nothing of killing Germans because it was either them or you," Charles Mann said. "So you develop that attitude with the training you had and what not, you know."

"There's nothing pleasant about war," Dwain Luce said. "It's dirty business. When you're in the middle of a fight, you might say, you're kind of occupied. But then when it's all over you have to gather up the dead — and, of course, they had units to do that — but we also had to help. And it just is something that's very regrettable. There's nothing glorious about war. But it was necessary that we did what we did."

**Excerpts from**

Bard, Mitchell G. *The Complete Idiot's Guide to World War II*. New York, NY: Alpha Books, 1999.

Danzer, Gerald A. et al. *The Americans*. Evanston, Illinois: McDougal Littell, 1998.

Ward, Geoffrey C. "THE WAR | PBS." *PBS: Public Broadcasting Service*. Web. 24 Apr. 2011. <<http://www.pbs.org/thewar/>>.