

Minority Service Members During WWII

Tuesday, I had the honor of being the luncheon speaker for the Moorhead Rotary thanks to Russ Hanson. I had my choice of topics. Because we just celebrated Martin Luther King Day, I decided to revive a presentation I developed on the contributions of minority service members during World War II. The US military was not integrated until 1948 President Truman issued an Executive Order 9811. Using video clips from the Library of Congress Veterans History Project, I was able to show WWII minority Veterans talking about serving in a segregated military. Here are a few examples.

Pearle W. Mack, Jr who served as career Army serving in WWII, Korea and Vietnam. Mack tells about a chaplain who was always with his black unit. The reason was that "He had been told that the Negroes coming over in the Army had been let out of cages and they had tails, and he wanted to satisfy his curiosity."

"I was fortunate to see, you know, overcoming segregation and overcoming a lot of the name calling, you know, the N name, you black SOB and you this, you the other. We are going to see that you don't go home and all this. And it was some of those same men when they got hit, they -- a lot of the black sailors, black marines responded to their needs. Those same men looked up with not shock but surprise maybe, that some of the men that they had called names and looked down on they were the very ones that, you know, put bandages on their wounds, calmed them down when they was out of it."

Grant Hirabayashi was a Japanese American who enlisted in the Army even though his parents were in an internment camps. As he said in his interview "Yes, initially they were sent to an internment camp in Tule Lake, CA followed by a transfer to Heart Mountain, WY." I'm not sure I would enlist if my government sent my family to an internment camp.

Hispanic American, Antonio Martinez was about the Belgian transport ship, the Leopoldville when it was hit by a German torpedo. He talked very matter-of-factly about the torpedo hit, landing in the ocean and being rescued. Martinez served in both WWII and Korea.

Native American from the Navajo tribe, Keith Little served in the Pacific and saw some of the fiercest fighting was serving as a Code Talker, helping maintain communications with a code the Japanese couldn't break.

These stories are from the 1940s and we've made considerable progress. However, in 1965, while I was stationed in Indiana I was an example of continued racism. An Airman from Alabama heard that his girlfriend had gone to a college party where a black man was present. He immediately broke up with her. History is a wonderful teacher, but only if we study it. "Study the past for knowledge; search for future for vision" is a personal motto I developed while in a leadership training session. It works.