

## **Minority Service Members During WWII**

Wednesday evening, I had the privilege of giving a presentation on minority servicemembers during WWII for the Moorhead public library. Way back in the early 2000s, I received a call from Lynne Kovash and Lauri Winterfeldt from Moorhead schools asking if I could do a presentation for their Martin Luther King Day in-service for teachers. I asked the obvious question – ‘you want an old white guy to present at MKL Day?’ Since we were in the process of recording Veterans oral histories, they suggested that as a topic. In my mind, that had very little to do with MKL Day. However, 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. The US military was not integrated until 1948 President Truman issued an Executive Order 9981. 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." Another interview was of a black soldier who served as a medic on a ship in the Pacific theater of the war. He tells about how shocked some of the wounded were being treated by a black soldier. This was especially true of soldiers who grew up in the South. I also interviewed a black Veteran who grew up in Wabasha, MN. He told me that he was one of two minority families there, the other being Polish. He served as an MP in the Philippines with police authority over white soldiers. WWII occurred before most of the civil rights court cases and laws were adopted. 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 aboard 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. He was served 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. Ira Hayes was a Pima Indian from Arizona and one of the flag raisers on Iwo Jima. History is a wonderful teacher, but only if we study and learn from it.