



A Distant Shore: African Americans of D-Day *Teacher's Guide*



Introduction:

Nearly 2,000 African Americans were among the troops that stormed the beaches of Normandy during the D-Day invasion on June 6, 1944. Many of their stories have been neglected in the dominant histories of D-Day, yet their contribution is unquestionable. In this moving 1-hour documentary, seven African-American men who fought through D-Day share the gripping stories of their experiences in battle. *A Distant Shore: African Americans of D-Day* also provides a broader context for understanding race relations during this era, showing how African American soldiers put their lives on the line abroad even as they struggled for equal rights at home upon their return.

Viewers follow the path of these 7 men from towns throughout America into the segregated training camps of the South, across the Atlantic, and into their baptism by fire on the beaches of France. Some of the soldiers in this program were as young as 18 at the time of the war-- all of them were determined to prove that African American soldiers would give their all to help bring fascism to an end. Compelling video footage and interviews with historians add additional dimensions to this story, giving students a framework for the individual accounts they hear throughout the program. *A Distant Shore* provides a unique perspective on WWII and the diversity of experiences among soldiers during this era.

Curriculum Links:

A Distant Shore: African-Americans of D-Day would be useful for U.S. History, World History, and Politics courses, and for course units on WWII. It is appropriate high school students.

Vocabulary:

Using the dictionary at www.merriamwebster.com, an internet resource such as www.history.com, or an encyclopedia, students should define or explain the significance of the following terms:

Amphibious
Battalion
Infantry
Segregation

Barrage
Corporeal
Largesse
Unequivocal

Discussion Questions:

1. Why do you think African Americans were willing to fight during WWII despite the challenges and discrimination they faced?
2. What were some of the responsibilities of the soldiers in this documentary? What were the risks they faced?
3. Despite the acts of heroism and bravery performed by African American soldiers, none were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor until 50 years after WWII. What kinds of acts of heroism are usually awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor? Why do you think African Americans were not awarded medals until much later?
4. Who was the black medic who behaved so heroically on Omaha Beach in this documentary? What did he do?
5. Which of the stories in this program did you find most interesting?
6. What is the difference between being drafted and volunteering for the army? Does this affect your status or possibility of promotion within the army according to the documentary?
7. African American soldiers are often referred to as 'fighting for democracy on two fronts.' What does this phrase mean?
8. What did the English man interviewed about the African American soldiers who came to his village in WWII say about his experiences with them?
9. The U.S. military started the long and difficult process of desegregation in 1948. How do you think the actions of the African American soldiers in WWII affect that decision?
10. Why do you think the stories of African Americans at D-Day have not been broadly acknowledged? How do you think they can receive more recognition for their service?

Extended Activities:

1. At the beginning of this documentary, one WWII veteran mentions that many contemporary WWII movies do not depict the participation of African Americans. Ask students to choose one of the soldiers interviewed in the documentary and write a film plot of 1-2 pages about his role in World War II. Students can also design movie posters/ads to go with these write-ups.
2. The first-person testimonies of the African American soldiers in this program help hit home the intensity of their experiences. Ask students to reflect on the stories they heard in this program and then write a journal entry or letter from the perspective of one of the soldiers in this film. Students may want to include other details about WWII and this era in their writings to provide additional context.
3. The men interviewed in *A Distant Shore* are just a few of the many African American soldiers who fought in WWII. Ask students to research the role of African American individuals or units in WWII and chose one to focus on. Students should then write short biographies of the soldier or unit of their choice and share their findings with the larger class or group.
4. Although they fought valiantly, there were no African American soldiers awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor until decades after WWII. Ask students to write a letter to the editor recommending that one of the men in this documentary or another WWII soldier they have researched for the Congressional Medal of Honor. Students should review the requirements for the Medal of Honor before they write their editorials.

Websites:

More background on WWII from History.com:

<http://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii>

The History Place: African Americans in WWII:

<http://www.historyplace.com/unitedstates/aframerwar/>

Truman Presidential Library and Museum: Desegregation of the Armed Forces:

http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/desegregation/large/index.php?action=chronology

The Congressional Medal of Honor Official site:

<http://www.cmohs.org>

Further Reading:

1. Bradley Biggs, *The Triple Nickels: America's First All-Black Paratroop Unit*, (Archon Books, 1986).
2. Nat Brandt, *Harlem at War: The Black Experience in WWII*, (Syracuse University Press, 1996).
3. Russell A. Buchanen, *Black Americans in World War Two*, (Clio Books, 1977).
4. Mary Penick Motley (ed.), *The Invisible Soldier: The Experience of the Black Soldier, World War II*, (Wayne State University Press, 1975).
5. Bernard C. Nalty, *The Right to Fight: African-American Marines in World War II*, (History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1995).
6. Graham A. Smith, *When Jim Crow Met John Bull: Black American Soldiers in World War II Britain*, (St. Martin's Press, 1988).
7. William Henry Hastie, *On Clipped Wings: The Story of Jim Crow in the Army Air Corps*, (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 1943).