

THE HISTORY CHANNEL® PRESENTS:

*Special Presentation*



***First to Fight: The Black Tankers of World War II***

They were a brave group of African American soldiers who put their lives on the line overseas while they still lived racially segregated lives of discrimination at home. During World War II, the 761<sup>st</sup> Tank Battalion made history as the first all black tank unit ever to see combat. And like the Tuskegee Airmen, the men of the 761<sup>st</sup> proved they were as competent as any soldier in the United States military. Their motto was “Come out fighting.” Over the course of 183 straight days on the front during World War II, the 761<sup>st</sup> helped liberate more than 30 towns under Nazi control. Collectively they were awarded 11 silver stars, 70 bronze stars, 250 purple hearts, and a medal of honor. This engaging documentary tells the story of the 761<sup>st</sup> both during the war and afterward as they were confronted with racism at home after bravely fighting for freedom overseas.

***First to Fight: The Black Tankers of World War II*** is a compelling one hour documentary which tells the story of the 761<sup>st</sup> from training through battle. Through moving commentary from many surviving veterans of the battalion, this program captures the experiences of this skilled unit. Through their own words and the reflections of historians, ***First to Fight*** follows the 761<sup>st</sup> as they recall the racism they faced, the bonds they made with fellow soldiers across racial lines, and the losses they suffered in battle. Riveting documentary footage and thoughtful revelations from 761<sup>st</sup> members will attract students to this fascinating World War II story. More than 30 years after coming home, the 761<sup>st</sup> was finally recognized with the prestigious Presidential Unit Citation. The program also examines the larger issue of how the U.S. military evolved from a

segregated institution after World War II. It is an excellent companion for course units on World War II and Black History Month related activities and events.

**Curriculum Links:**

*First to Fight: The Black Tankers of World War II* would be useful for American History, American Studies, Current Events, and Social Studies courses, and for course units on World War II. It would be an excellent companion for Black History Month lesson plans and activities. **Due to some sensitive language, we recommend that teachers view this program in its entirety before screening it to students. It is appropriate for high school students.** This program fulfills the following guidelines outlined by the National Council for History Education: Patterns of Social and Political Interaction and Human Interaction With the Environment.

**Vocabulary:**

battalion  
catastrophic  
deployment  
discrimination  
hedgerow  
indoctrinated  
patriotism  
predominant  
prejudice

**Discussion Questions:**

1. Why do you think the members of the 761<sup>st</sup> Battalion wanted to fight in World War II? What do you think would have been the pros and cons of military service for African Americans generally during World War II?
2. What were some of the methods used by the 761<sup>st</sup> to prepare for tank warfare? What kinds of skills do you think they needed to develop before they entered World War II fighting?
3. Some would say the 761<sup>st</sup> had a lot to prove when they embarked for war. What do you think they had to prove, and to whom? Do you think they achieved this goal? Explain.
4. What role did Eleanor Roosevelt play in overturning segregation in the military? What were the results of her efforts?
5. What was your reaction to hearing of the racism faced by 761<sup>st</sup> members? What were the contradictions this kind of discrimination revealed?
6. One member of the 761<sup>st</sup> described the way racism disappeared in the face of a “common enemy.” Why do you think this was the case? What do you think united soldiers in those moments?
7. How would you describe the role and results of the 761<sup>st</sup> battalion during World War II? What legacy do you think they left behind?
8. Do you think the service of the 761<sup>st</sup> and other African Americans during World War II helped eliminate and discourage racism in the United States? Discuss.
9. What do you think was the significance of the Presidential Unit Citation for the 761<sup>st</sup>?
10. One veteran in this documentary says, in paraphrase, that there is nothing wrong with America, just the people in America. What do you think this statement

- means? Do you think this was true during the World War II era?
11. How and when was segregation official ended in the U.S. military? How do you think the military, and the United States as a whole, has changed since World War II?

### **Extended Activities:**

1. This documentary describes the experiences of the 761<sup>st</sup> and the Presidential Unit Citation they received many years later to honor their service. Imagine that it is your job to write an official proclamation describing the contribution of the 761<sup>st</sup> to the victories of World War II. In small groups or individually, write a proclamation which you feel captures this contribution and the role the 761<sup>st</sup> played in World War II and U.S. history.
2. The 761<sup>st</sup> Tank Battalion was one of just many African American units to fight during World War II and in other wars. At the library or on the Internet, research another African American unit that fought in a U.S. war. Create a presentation or write a short research paper describing this unit and their role in the conflict in which they were involved. While you pursue your research, think about how the experiences of this unit might be similar to or different from the 761<sup>st</sup> based on the historical era and context. Present your findings and projects to your larger class or group in a short presentation.
3. Break up into groups of four or five. For this activity, send students on a search to discover how and when segregation officially ended in the U.S. military. Ask students to locate the piece of legislation that officially ended segregation and write a short synopsis of the document. Students can also create Powerpoint presentations or illustrated timelines which trace the history of African Americans in the U.S. military leading up to the desegregation of the armed forces.
4. Often times, we can learn the most about the history of U.S. wars from those who lived through them. Locate a veteran in your family or in your community and interview them about their experiences in the military. Chose a few stories or insights to share with your larger class or group. (Students may want to consult The History Channel's guidelines for oral history before starting this activity: <http://www.historychannel.com/classroom/oralhistguidelines.pdf>.)

### **Resources:**

#### ***Books***

1. Abdul-Jabbar, Kareem and Anthony Walton. *Brothers In Arms: The Epic Story of the 761st Tank Battalion, WWII's Forgotten Heroes*, (Broadway, 2004).
2. Astor, Gerald. *The Right to Fight: A History of African Americans in the Military*, (Da Capo, 2001).
3. Latty, Yvonne and Ron Tarver. *We Were There: Voices of African American Veterans, from World War II to the War in Iraq*, (Amistad Press, 2004).
4. Wright, Kai. *Soldiers of Freedom: An Illustrated History of African Americans in the Armed Forces*, (Black Dog & Leventhal Publishers, 2002).

#### ***Websites***

1. A site with helpful background information, photographs, and primary sources on

- the 761<sup>st</sup> Tank Battalion: <http://www.761st.com/>.
2. A site developed by the National Park Service highlighting the words and experiences of African American veterans :  
[http://www.nps.gov/untold/banners\\_and\\_backgrounds/militarybanner/military.htm](http://www.nps.gov/untold/banners_and_backgrounds/militarybanner/military.htm)
  3. Historical context on African Americans in the military from the Library of Congress: <http://rs6.loc.gov/ammem/aahtml/exhibit/aopart7.html>
  4. Key primary source on the desegregation of the U.S. armed forces:  
<http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?doc=84>