

American Iliad: The 18th Infantry Regiment in World War II, pages 339-340

The attack went off as planned, and Learnard's men gained the crest of Hill 310 against negligible resistance, ahead of schedule, by early morning on 18 March. Company G, trailing to the rear of the 1st Battalion, turned south and descended the southern outskirts of the town. The enemy fought tenaciously, but by afternoon they lost the fight and a number of prisoners were taken. "The exception to the attack going according to plan," a later interview with now Regimental S-3 Major McGregor disclosed, "was the result of Captain Jesse Miller's Company B 4th rifle platoon—47 colored volunteers who joined [the assault by] Company G without order from anyone."

The presence of African-American soldiers assigned to a white infantry regiment was unusual, given that the US Army was not integrated in 1945. Integration came about as a result of a critical problem facing General Eisenhower: namely a tremendous shortage of infantry soldiers following the costly fighting in the Hurtgen Forest and during the Battle of the Bulge. The 1st Infantry Division, for example, was only at 60 percent of its assigned strength. As a result, Eisenhower made the decision to permit African-American soldiers to volunteer for duty as combat infantrymen with the understanding that after the necessary training they would be committed to frontline service.

Some 2,200 volunteers were organized into 53 rifle platoons and then assigned to rifle companies throughout the 12th Army Group. One of these platoons had been previously assigned to Company B on 13 March while the 18th Infantry Regiment was in Bonn.

The 1st Battalion After-Action Report noted at the time, "The Negro platoon assigned to Company B arrived and its men were indoctrinated as to the merits, accomplishments, and expectations of members of the 1st Division in a talk given by the assistant Division Commander, Brigadier General Taylor." A white lieutenant and a sergeant who had combat experience led the volunteer platoon, which was to be used tactically in the same manner as the other platoons. Colonel Williamson later explained to his own staff, "This was an experiment to see if colored troops could be employed efficiently in combat mixed with white soldiers." He emphasized that, contrary to practices on segregated Army installations, colored troops wearing the Red One would receive equal treatment with white troops regarding mess, billets, and recreation. In addition, they would be required to hold up their end in combat without special favor, but also without prejudicial assignments.

Major McGregor, remembering Miller's 4th rifle platoon's first day in battle on 18 March at Quirrenbach noted, "They simply helped Company G in it fight without orders from anyone. They proved to be a very real help to the company, disposing of at least 25 Germans. The battalion commander was much impressed with their initiative and fighting spirit, though their inexperience did result in an unusually high number of casualties. In their first two shows they lost 20 of their 47 men."

Captain Lindo also remembered the time he had an African-American platoon under an earlier experiment during the Battle of the Bulge. "They were all volunteers that had heard of this," he recalled. "All came as buck privates, many having taken reduction in grade to serve under white officers in our outfit. They volunteered for the job to prove themselves, and I could not keep them 'out of trouble'. Whether in reserve or in attacks, they killed Germans."

Based on an earlier experience commanding a 4th Platoon at the Bulge, Captain Lindo later added, "What it proved to me is that the color of your skin or your face didn't mean a damn thing." The fighting at Quirrenbach was noted in the 2nd Battalion report and it reinforced what Lindo believed, recording, "Their actions were comparable to that of other platoons of the Regiment, and a source of deep pride to its members." This successful employment of African-American platoons by the 18th Infantry was one of the many precursors that eventually led to full integration in the US armed forces.

From Robert Baumer and Mark J. Reardon, *American Iliad: The 18th Infantry Regiment in World War II* (Bedford, PA: Aberjona Press, 2004).

1. What is meant by the following words used in the reading: "negligible" and "tenaciously" (1st paragraph); "indoctrinated", "mess" and "billets" (4th paragraph); and "precursors" (last paragraph)?
2. What reasons does the author give for why African-American soldiers were integrated with whites?
3. In what ways were African-American soldiers to be treated the same as white soldiers?
4. According to Major McGregor and Captain Lindo, how did the African-American soldiers perform in combat?

5. Do you agree with the author's conclusion at the end of the reading, "This successful employment of African-American platoons by the 18th Infantry was one of the many precursors that eventually led to full integration in the US armed forces"? Why or why not?

Use all of the readings to answer the questions that follow:

1. In what ways (or details) do the primary and secondary sources agree?
2. In what ways (or details) do the primary and secondary sources contrast each other?
3. Do you think African-American infantry soldiers made a difference in the war against Germany in Europe—why or why not?
4. Taken as a whole, why did the U.S. Army change its policy of having African-American soldiers fight alongside white soldiers?
5. If YOU were an African-American soldier during World War II—would you have agreed to fight? Why or why not?
6. Since the *Chicago Tribune* was a northern newspaper, how do you think southern newspapers covered the same events dealing with African-Americans in World War II?