African Americans in the Korean War:

Forgotten Warriors of the Forgotten War

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Today, many people, especially the young, view an integrated and desegregated society as the way it has always been. However, at 4:00 a.m. on the morning of June 25, 1950, North Korean troops attacked across the 38th parallel. At that time the United States military was not desegregated, despite President Harry Truman’s Executive Order 9981 of July 26, 1948. Military leaders had decommissioned some, but not all, all-black units whose colors had been furled. Decommissioned, the black soldiers returned to the United States. Other units, including the 24th Infantry Regiment—originally called “Buffalo Soldiers” who served in the American West in the 19th century—remained in the Far East as occupation troops while military leaders discharged white units and send them home. For the 24th—a unit commanded mostly by white officers and a part of the segregated army—the Korean War was not a catalyst for integration, but rather a definitive example of racial bigotry and discrimination.

That the military, especially the army, dragged its feet in complying with Truman’s Executive Order surprised no one. A century before, Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court Roger B. Taney in the *Dred Scott* case pointed to the exclusion of blacks from state militias as one rational for denying blacks citizenship. While most Northern states abolished slavery before the Civil War, most of them excluded blacks from their militias or allowed them join only in times of manpower shortages. Changes came during the Civil War. Because the North needed maximum manpower in the war, enrollment was open to blacks, and more than 186,000 of them joined the ranks of the Union army while 30,000 joined the navy. By the time the United States entered World War II, discrimination against African Americans in the military had become an extremely charged issue. While fighting a war against racist regimes, the United States prohibited more than 10 percent of its own population from enjoying the full benefits of a free society. However, as the war continued to rage, the American government allowed some blacks to serve given manpower needs. The famous general, George Patton, even bragged about some units that served under him. But, still, discrimination was still the rule not the exception. Between 1945 and the beginning of the Korean War, little had changed. But it was on the way when on July 7, 1950, North Korea invaded South Korea. The United Nations Security Council called for a multi-national force to participate alongside Americans in an attempt to staunch the invasion.
Although the 24th Infantry Regiment was only one of more than 100 black units that fought in Korea, it is by far the best known. It was also the only unit of regimental size; most of the others were company size, primarily designated as service or transportation units. Several were field artillery battalions, but only one other infantry unit, the 2nd Ranger Infantry Company, which was attached to the 7th Infantry Division. To a large degree, this situation reflected the pre-World War II era stereotype of the African American soldier—a military form of white supremacy—which posited that Negroes were poor combat soldiers, suited only for service or transportation units. Further, white commanding officers believed that black soldiers should be segregated because it reflected civilian society.

The 24th Infantry Regiment was one of two black regiments always assigned duty that no one else wanted. On the American frontier, men in the 24th joined their black brethren of the 10th Cavalry and mapped substantial parts of the American plains. Commanders sent the 24th to the Philippines in 1899 to help win the Spanish-American War and to suppress the nativist insurgency. While in the islands, the 24th helped install a Filipino civilian government and also supervised elections and insuring residents of rights that blacks in America did not enjoy at home. White commanders and common soldiers denigrated the Filipino rebels using derogatory racial terms while the rebels offered blacks commissions if they would join the revolution. But, with a few exceptions, blacks refused to fight against the United States. This was repeated fifty years later when North Koreans and Chinese political indoctrination officers attempted to convert African American prisoners-of-war with equally limited success.

The 24th spent World War I stateside; military policy-makers thereby prohibited them from engaging in combat for which they were trained. However, World War II was different—for at least part of the regiment. After spending several months as a support group in New Hebrides, on March 11, 1944, the 1st Battalion entered combat against the Japanese at Bougainville. The men performed with such efficiency that commanders ordered the group to clean out Japanese holdouts on both Saipan and Okinawa before the hostilities with Japan closed.

While the manpower levels of the 24th fell during the post-World War II era, it remained stronger than most white units because a great majority of black soldiers viewed even a segregated military life as
better than what they experienced in Jim Crow America. Theoretically, the blacks’ military lives should have improved when President Harry Truman issued Executive Order 998, but it was not until eighteen months later that Secretary of the Army Gordon Gray reluctantly agreed to make military assignments based on qualification rather than race. It was not surprising then, that when the North Koreans crossed the 38th parallel, most African Americans in the Army still served in all-black units.xii

When the Korean War erupted, the 24th was the last all-black regiment serving overseas. It was the holding unit for all African American soldiers transferred to the Far East. However, the seemingly sudden North Korean onslaught expedited the integration of units as planners were unable to gauge how many new draftees were white and how many were black. Casualty rates were so high that commanders simply plugged American soldiers–black and white–into whatever units needed reinforcements.xiii

The 24th was part of the 25th Division. For three years before the war began, commanders stationed the regiment at Gifu, Japan, 370 miles southwest of Tokyo, on the main island of Honshu. The high command of the 8th Army had earlier mandated that regimental combat training–largely ignored since the close of World War II–be completed by May of 1950. However, the continual rotation of officers and men made training problematic for the entire command. The 24th had its own unique problems, as almost all black non-commissioned officers were career men who really did not want to rotate back to the states. The company-level officers corps of the regiment were largely white, and many were present for a three-month rotation in Japan to give them foreign exposure before being released back to civilian life. In addition, most commissioned white officers, regardless of rank, viewed assignment to a black unit as punishment and as career ending. None of the above circumstances were conducive to combat readiness or to the development of esprit de corps.xiv

To further hamper readiness, planners had earlier reduced stateside basic training from the traditional fourteen weeks to six weeks, a necessity to bring unit strength up to designated levels. The post-World War II manpower draw down mandated by Congress conflicted with the demands placed on troops serving as occupation forces throughout the world. In Europe and the Far East, understaffed commands had to cope with an escalating cold war. Planners forced commands to provide not just
advanced training for their new arrivals, they also had to complete essential basic combat training when new men arrived at station. Commanders also organized the 24th and the 2nd Battalion as training contingents, further reducing the available personnel for day-to-day assignments. Outdated equipment compounded the problems of training the men. xv

Reflecting the prejudice rampant in the military of the day, the high command further blamed poor results by the 24th on the low educational level of the men, 60 percent of whom scored in the two lowest levels of the Army’s intelligence attitude tests. While the Air Force had white officers who recognized the relation between segregation and race-related problems, the Army ignored that connection. xvi As late as three years after the Korean armistice, General Mark Clark wrote an openly racist article in U. S. News and World Report stating that “I oppose the indiscriminate mixing of white and Negroes.” xvii

When President Truman authorized the use of air and naval forces in support for of South Korea, the 24th was the only unit in the Asiatic theater that was near designated strength. Still, it was not until July 6 that planners ordered the 24th to ship out for Korea, well after the initial military response had fallen short of stopping the North Koreans. xviii

Although the command structure of the 24th Regiment remained in turmoil, the non-commissioned officer staff was in better shape than the rest of the 8th Army. However, Maj. Gen. William B. Keen failed to levy the 24th for experienced NCOs because of the long held prejudice of blacks commanding whites at any level. As they prepared to ship out for Korea, commanders filled vacancies within the 24th with African Americans wherever found. Cooks, mess men, quartermasters, and clerks poured in with the dregs of the brig, including heroin addicts and junkies. Many of those with non-combat military occupational calcifications lacked uniforms and combat equipment. xix

Much of the equipment needed was with men on field maneuvers as clerks were cutting the units’ orders. Dock hands loaded the equipment on to trains and shipped directly to the port of debarkation with nothing more than cursory field maintenance. Of the regiment’s radios, 80 percent failed to function due to poor maintenance and heavy usage. Clerks gave the soldiers World War II vintage M-1 rifles that were
worn out, some even lacking firing pins. Several companies did not have the basic materials they needed such as Browning Automatic rifles, 4.2 inch mortars, light machine guns, and rocket launchers, along with ammunition. On July 11 and 12, commanders gave orders as the unit shipped out from Japan. Most of the men anticipated that they would return to Japan before Thanksgiving. By 1400 hours on July 13, the entire regiment arrived at Pusan, only to find a lack of cranes and other equipment for offloading the civilian boats on which they had traveled. Further, the Korean longshoremen were on strike.\textsuperscript{xx}

The high command ordered the regiment to take the flank of Gen. Kean's 25\textsuperscript{th} Division in the southern and eastern portion of Korea. From there, the regiment would be in position to slide to the west and pick up the slack should Maj. Gen. William F. Dean's 24\textsuperscript{th} Division collapse. The 2\textsuperscript{nd} Battalion of the 24\textsuperscript{th} traveled by train on the 110-mile trip north the Poang-dong. The deployment was so rapid that many of the men left without rations, that forcing them to eat local food. The resulting diarrhea reduced fighting effectiveness. The next day, planners ordered the entire regiment to move to Kumch'on, eighty-five miles to the west. The 2\textsuperscript{nd} Battalion immediately reloaded and moved out, but the 1\textsuperscript{st} and 3\textsuperscript{rd} Battalions remained in Pusan, pursuant to new orders. Once the 2\textsuperscript{nd} left for Kumch'on, the 3\textsuperscript{rd} went to Yeach'on to support the Korean Army there. The rapid advance of the North Koreans had nearly broken the South Koreans, and that fact dictated the movement of American forces as support troops in several places. By the time the 3\textsuperscript{rd} reached Yeach'on, they had traveled for four days, all the time without adequate food and water. Without rest, the men were hungry and dehydrated. Approximately one-third of their equipment never completed the journey from Japan.\textsuperscript{xxi}

To protect the important town of Hamch'ang, Gen. Kean detached the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Battalion from the 8\textsuperscript{th} Army reserves and moved it onto the road between Hamch'ang and Wanju. Simultaneously, Kean dispatched the 3\textsuperscript{rd} to protect roads around Hamch'ang. Lack of competent intelligence at the command level kept the regiment's battalions in motion for several days. Commanders constantly issued contradictory orders, especially with regard to Yeach'on. Finally, Brig. Gen. Vernnard Wilson ordered a task force under the Operations Officer, Capt. John B. Zanin to return to Yeach'on and to protect the combat engineers still there. As soon as Zanin and his men reached Yeach'on, the North Korea's 31\textsuperscript{st} Regiment
attacked them. Within an hour, Zanin withdrew his tanks and retreated to Hamch’ong. During the withdrawal, Zanin and Pvt. First Class Jesse J. Willingham risked their lives to save others, and both later received Silver Stars, making Willingham one of the first African Americans so decorated during the Korean conflict. Despite the obvious incompetence of command at the battalion level, the higher command of the 8th Army deemed the subsequent assault on Yeach’on as a success. MacArthur, however, publicly credited the success to the South Koreans, thereby revealing his racist attitude toward his own black troops. Tom Lambert of the Associated Press was present with the men at Yeach’on and made sure that the true facts reached such black newspapers as the *Pittsburgh Courier* and the *Washington Afro-American*. Congressmen Thomas J. Lane of Massachusetts and Walter H. Judd of Minnesota took up the praise of the men and used the success of the 24th to counter Communist propaganda that white America still enslaved blacks.\(^\text{xxii}\)

Gen. Walker recognized that the advances of the North Korean’s 6th Division threatened to disrupt his supply lines in central Korea. On July 31, he decided to abandon the area and ordered Gen. Kean to withdraw his 25th Division, initially to Samminjin, thirty miles northwest of Pusan, and then to Masan, a port thirty miles to the west of Pusan. The 24th Regiment began its movement to take up defensive positions in what became known as the Pusan Perimeter. Upon the arrival of the men, commanders threw the entire division into the gap between Chinju and Masan south of the Nam and Naktong rivers to thereby confront the North Korean’s 6th Division.\(^\text{xxiii}\)

On the night of August 5, a group of approximately thirty North Koreans infiltrated the position of the 1st Battalion and opened fire. Battalion command staff, led by Col. Pierce, was supposedly meeting to plot strategy. In fact, Pierce went to sleep while his staff waited for him to wake up. Both the South Korean support unit and Company L of the 1st Battalion panicked, broke and ran away. The North Koreans killed the black company commander, Capt. Rothwell Burke, and two enlisted men in the melee. While white officers later claimed that Company L broke and used that fact as evidence that the black soldiers exhibited dubious qualities as combat personnel, in fact, the battalion officers bear equal blame. While Pierce slept, no one ordered the units to establish defensive positions or perimeters.\(^\text{xxiv}\)
Individuals soldiers continued to display the bravery for which the American military is well known. Pvt. First Class William Thompson laid down machine gun fire while Company M escaped behind him. Although ordered to fall back, and showered with grenades and small arms fire, he continued to cover the retreat until commanders had safely removed all Americans. Pvt. Thompson died a hero’s death. For his gallantry, America gave him the Congressional Medal of Honor.xxv

The 24th Regiment was deeply involved in the defense of the Pusan Perimeter, sometimes successfully, sometimes not. On August 8, the 3rd Battalion failed to re-take an unnamed hill, that allowing the North Koreans to threaten task force Kern’s supply lines. Failure was due primarily became of an entrenched enemy, but the Air Force strafed the combat zone causing casualties among its own forces. The next day, the men--despite the loss of many of their officers--took the hill by 1100 hours with little enemy opposition.xxvi

Three days later, the 1st Battalion went into action to the west of Haman near the mining village of Tundok on Pil-bond Mountain where the North Koreans were establishing a major staging area. Enemy forces trapped and wiped out a reconnaissance unit, including its two tanks. As Company C of the 1st came up in support, the North Koreans opened fire from the heights above. Many of the men in Company C panicked, threw down their weapons, and ran. The incident reinforced the low opinion of African Americans as fighting men in the eyes of white commanders.

The next day, the 2nd Battalion entered the fray. Moving along the ridge line, the 1st had covered the day before, two companies came under enemy fire. The men of Company F retreated rather than attempt an assault to relieve pressure on their comrades. Lieutenant Joseph O’Neill, the company commander, later stated that many of the men believed that they should not have to fight when they would not receive any benefits, such as the right to vote, upon their return to the United States. Authorities ordered an investigation but because of the speed of events and the code of silence among members of Company F, little could be done and the authorities charged only a few men.xxvii

The failure of the 24th Regiment left the 5th Infantry surrounded and exposed to attack. Commanders ordered the 3rd Battalion into the fight, but Col. John T. Corley, the new battalion commander,
reported that the enemy had beaten back his men who were now scattered. The enemy forced the 25th Division to withdraw the next day. The entire fiasco demonstrated the need for proper training, not just for new recruits, but also for the officer corps. The practice of rotating officers into the 24th and then out as quickly as possible, even in a combat zone, demonstrated to black soldiers that the high command considered them of little value to the military. In many cases, the officer corps, from the regimental commander down, were either openly racists or were suspected of being such.

By September, a shortage of enlisted men was so great in all combat zones that the army finally began to abide by Truman’s Executive Order 9981. Commanders began assigning African Americans to white units simply because that was where they were needed. However, commanders did not assign whites to the 24th. To alleviate the shortage of trained non-commissioned officers, planners moved a number of white NCOs from other units of the 25th Infantry into the 24th Infantry Regiment with the promise that if they were successful the high command would promote them to commissioned officers. For the first time, black officers commanded white NCO personnel. Although segregation was breaking down within the army, it created problems for the 24th. Experienced black NCOs in the 24th saw whites come in and quickly receive battlefield commissions. The favoritism of whites over African Americans within the Army again negatively affected morale.

September opened with a North Korean assault on the Pusan Perimeter using mortars and artillery fire of the entire 25th Division’s position at the front. The 24th Regiment held their 13,000-yard sector in the center, suffering eight fatalities and twenty-four wounded, with seventeen missing in action and assumed dead. The Americans held but integrated South Korean units broke. As they retreated, their black American lieutenant confronted the men urging them to turn and fight. They shot him in the head and continued their disorderly retreat.

The defensive positions established by the 2nd Battalion were not good, and North Korean fighters mauled several platoons before other men started retreating. For the 2nd, the price was high. One lieutenant reported that he had sixty-nine men at the beginning of the fight, and only fourteen made it back to friendly lines. By the time tanks from the 1st Battalion reached the headquarters of the 2nd, most of the
defenders had left, and the officers who did not run were all dead. By 0730 the next morning, remnants of Companies E and G of the 2nd Battalion counter attacked with aid from the 1st. Only forty men remained. The carnage was almost unbelievable. The counter attack bogged down when North Korean reinforcements came to help their comrades. In the onslaught, the regimental command post in Haman was itself under attack. The enemy also attacked Battery C and the 159th Field Artillery, with the Americans reduced to hand-to-hand combat, surviving only because close quarter air raids dropped napalm on the human waves of the North Koreans. The next day, the men of the 2nd Battalion had no desire to return to combat. Both black and white officers tried to order them into battle-ready position, but the men refused to obey. Observer accounts of hysteria and panic were, once again, common as whites viewed blacks as unreliable. The fault lies with institutional racism, which preconditioned failure.

In the second phase of the war, commanders ordered that the 25th Division, including the 24th Regiment to support Gen. MacArthur’s Inchon landing by attacking from the southwest in the direction of the port of Kunsan, about 100 miles to the northwest. While the 2nd Battalion lost fifty-five men taking Hill 212, the 1st and 2nd battalions had less trouble re-establishing themselves on Subak-san and Battle Mountain. Later the 1st retook the village of Tundok with scant opposition. During the night of September 22, the North Koreans infiltrated the unit’s bivouac and fired mortars that destroyed the battalion’s headquarters. Company C managed to eliminate the mortars, but at the cost of all of the company’s officers who did not live through the engagement. Still, the men of the 24th pushed on as part of Task Force Matthews. On September 28, they captured the village of Namwon and in the process liberated twenty-eight American prisoners-of-war. After taking Namwon, Task Force Matthews swung to the west, moving toward Kunsan but ran out of fuel. Task Force Blair, a motorized unit replaced Matthews; it included the 3rd Battalion of the 24th Regiment. As the 8th Army moved north, the 25th Division remained behind to complete mop-up operations.

Two months later in the third phase of the war, the commanders of the 8th Army made preparations for a final push to the Yalu River. They moved the 24th Regiment initially to Sunch’on, thirty miles north of P’yongyang. Once they were there, commanders ordered them to Kunu-ri, a place within seventy miles of
the Yalu River, where they replaced the 1st Cavalry Division. Bad intelligence revealed that 14,000 North Korean troops faced them; in fact, nineteen Chinese divisions were on the scene, 150,000 strong, with men who had been battle-tested. As the assault began, the 24th Regiment moved up the east side of the Kyryong River into the mountains. The 9th Infantry Regiment of the 2nd Division, including the 3rd Battalion of the 24th which was on its right flank. The 3rd was the only all-black battalion serving in the war. Meanwhile, the command placed the 24th in the mountains rather than the river valley. Why? If the unit performed poorly—as command had believed it had in the past—the battle’s outcome would not be affected. The terrain made re-supplying the entire regiment difficult. The mountains blocked radio transmissions, and the winter temperatures reduced battery life.

When the Chinese counterattack came, Company B of the 2nd Battalion had pushed farther into enemy territory than any other unit. Command ordered it to fall back and assume defensive positions. As the day wore on, communications failed; command had moved to the rear; and North Koreans had surrounded several of the 24th units. When technicians briefly restored communications the next day, command finally ordered the men the forward units of the 24th to withdraw. North Koreans had them surrounded, and Company C ran into heavy opposition and surrendered. As to exactly what happened—reports differ. Some indicate that command made a decision; other sources state that the lieutenant in charge allowed the men to vote; and yet others say that the lieutenant was explaining options when the Chinese arrived and immediately shot him in the head. Other battalions faced similar hardships. By November 29, the enemy had pushed into Kunu-ri, and the 3rd Battalion reported that the Chinese had established road blocks on the edge of town.

All American units, including the 24th Regiment, had difficulty during their retreat southward. The 24th route took them through the town of Sinanju, but on the south side of it, to avoid the Chinese, the men took a route that their trucks could not traverse. They burned the trucks to keep them from falling into the enemy’s hands. Moving out with only what they could carry on their backs, they men had a new battle. They had to fight severe fatigue and hunger in addition to coping with temperatures as low as six degrees below zero.
By Christmas of 1950, the illusion of maintaining racially segregated units was completely gone.
The 24th had lost more than one-third of its men. Stateside, command gave new draftees only six weeks of basic training (that replacing the standard fourteen weeks) and quickly shipped them out. Men now went into whatever unit needed reinforcing. Now, African Americans went into previously all-white units. In most cases, whites did not go into historically all-black outfits, but exception became less rare. When Gen. Matthew Ridgway replaced Gen. Walker as commander of the 8th Army, change came. Ridgeway noted that defeatism permeated his entire command, not just the historically African American units.

When the Chinese mounted their New Year’s Eve offensive, Ridgeway decided that his forces must abandon Seoul. The 8th Army, including the 25th Division retreated southward once more. But, mail arrived for the first time in months, that boosting the men’s moral. Battalions in the 24th Regiment did their jobs despite continuing turmoil of command staff. Eventually, Ridgeway replaced MacArthur as overall commander in Asia, including the United Nations command in Korea. Committed to obeying Truman’s Executive Order 9981, integration of units came rapidly. By the end of April of 1951, the press reported—and the men repeated by word-of-mouth—that the 24th would soon be deactivated. For some time, command considered rotating the men out and replacing them with new, integrated units but ultimately decided that, that course of action would violate the Congressional Act of 1866 which created the 24th as a segregated black outfit. In the end, the men furled the regiments colors and went home to see family and friends. The sociological theories that combat action could be successful with integrated squads was proven. Esprit de corps rose, and American fighting men again proved their metal. Black men and white men fighting together, eating together, and sleeping in the same tents worked.

The 24th had a checkered history in Korea. Sometimes, it served with distinction, and sometimes it did not. Ultimately, the white power structure retired the 24th because white policy makers finally realized that—as the self-perceived leader of the free world—America could no longer afford to openly discriminate against more than 10 percent of its population on the basis of race. The 24th Regiment’s history should not be forgotten, nor should it be repeated.
Notes


v.For more information, see Gail B. Stewart, *Fighting for Freedom: Blacks in the American Military* (Detroit, 2006).


xiii.Ibid., 38, 47.

xiv.Ibid.

xv.Ibid., 42, 60-61.

xvi.For more on the problems, see Gropman, *The Air Force Integrates*. 
xvii. for the general’s quote, see Mark Clark, “Does Integration Work in the Armed Forces? U. S. News and World Report” (May 1956).


xix. Ibid., 75, 77.

xx. Ibid., 77, 82.

xxi. Ibid., 77.

xxii. Ibid., 93.

xxiii. Ibid., 93.

xxiv. Ibid., 128.

xxv. Ibid., 130.

xxvi. Ibid., 131.

xxvii. Ibid., 137, 140-141.

xxviii. Ibid., 164.

xxix. Ibid.

xxx. Ibid., 179, 183.

xxxi. Ibid., 204.

xxii. Ibid.

xxiii. Ibid., 221.