

BLACK VETERANS EARNED RESPECT DURING WWII

By Ellen Knight¹



On parade in 1949, veterans of all ethnicities marched together in Winchester on Memorial Day. On entering the services during World War II, however, African-American servicemen were assigned to segregated units.

On Oct. 13, 1942, Reginald Guy, along with two other black draftees, left for Camp Devens, the last of five brothers to join the armed forces. “Surely,” *The Winchester Star* commented, “this is a record which few families can match.”²

By the war’s end, multiple brothers and sisters in families of all ethnicities across town had joined up, but the contribution to the Allied cause by Winchester’s black community remains an honorable record for reasons other than numbers. For the thirty-plus African-Americans whose names are on the Honor Roll details of their service are elusive, though a glimpse of their experiences may be given.

In their youth, many of the boys were familiar in the community because they had grown up in town, gone to the schools, and played on high school or town sports teams. They had various claims to home-town or school fame. Harold Boardley Jr. was said to have been “the snappiest dresser” in his high school class (1940). Robert Jackson was vice-president of his senior class (1943) and a member of the unbeaten football squad of 1942, the school’s first state championship team.

The men all had different stories. Some never finished high school but went to work as early as possible, while a few went on to college. Several joined the National Guard during the years before the war and were among the first to enter the regular army or navy (mostly the army) after the first peace-time draft was introduced in the fall of 1940.

In March 1941, a special service was held at the New Hope Baptist Church for nine black men inducted into the 372nd Infantry Battalion, a racially segregated U.S. Army regiment formed during World War I from National Guard units. These included the other four Guy brothers – Alden, Warren, Arthur, and Charles – Clifford Latham, Philip Thomas, Ethelbert Griffith, Clarence Bryan, and Harry Kirby.

Two years later, a service flag was presented to the New Hope Baptist Church, sponsored by the Victory Club, an organization of women working for the church and the boys in the service. It was quite an occasion with greetings from the Board of Selectmen, Winchester Civilian Defense, American Legion, Selective Service Board, delegations from VFW posts, plus 12 colored soldiers of the 366th Regiment at Fort Devens, as well as 25 black Red Cross nurses. Hizikiah Griffith, a black veteran of WWI, was master of ceremonies. The flag then had 23 blue stars. More would be added.

The first inductees all entered the same outfit, the 3rd Battalion of the 372nd Infantry. After Pearl Harbor, some were reassigned to one or another of the many other all-black units. Pvt. Ethelbert Griffith, for example, went to the 1694th Engineer Combat Battalion formed at Camp Livingston, Louisiana. Winchester blacks inducted after Pearl Harbor Day also went into several of the segregated units.

At the beginning of the war, most African Americans were assigned to non-combat units and relegated to support duties such as supply, maintenance, and transportation. Sgt. Philip Barksdale was a detail clerk with the 1167th (Colored) Training Group at Jefferson Barracks in Missouri (a basic training site). Sgt. Charles Kirby was an aviation metalsmith with the 310 Aviation Squadron (a segregated unit) at Buckingham Army Air Field in Florida. Jackson was also an aviation metalsmith. T-4 Reg Guy became a motor transport technician with the 1883d Engineer Aviation Battalion (Colored) formed at Eglin Field, Florida.



Ellsworth West

As the war went on and losses grew, black Americans moved into other positions and ranks. Some eventually went into combat zones. Sgt. Ellsworth West went to the Ryukyu Islands, and PFC Clifford Latham saw service in the Rhineland. George Cromwell was with the quartermaster corps in the Mediterranean Theater. Reg Guy's unit helped build the Ledo Road in India.

Kermit Edmunds, who graduated with the Class of 1942, left about a month afterward for the service. His entry into the Army was actually announced on the radio, when he and other members of classmate Courtney Crandall's Orchestra were interviewed on WEEI. It was reported that he was expecting to continue playing his trumpet since he had enlisted as a musician in the band at Fort Devens.

A couple months later he was at Fort McClellan in Alabama, one of the training areas for the 92nd Infantry "Buffalo" Division. He became a bugler for one of the 92nd's units, the 371st Infantry Regiment. In 1944, the 92nd became the only all-black division to fight in Europe, and T-5 Edmunds went along with them to the war in Italy.



*Kermit Edmunds as a
WHS graduate*



*Harold Boardley
as a graduate of
the class of 1940*

Unfortunately, only snippets of information about many Winchester service people may be found in the local newspaper or Town records. Winfree Smith and Harold Boardley Jr., one reads, went to the same training camp for Seabees, Camp Peary. (Winchester's Lt. (jg) John Volpe was there, also, introducing new training programs – see below). What became of MM2 Smith was unreported, but BM2c Boardley is known to have seen service in New Guinea.

Other scraps of information tell us someone else had been inducted or another was home on leave. One woman volunteered for the WAMS and left for training at Westover Field. In many cases, such announcements were the last bits of news printed.

However, a few short stories may be told, revealing divergent experiences of Winchester's black veterans, with the last particularly paying tribute to the character of the African-American combat soldier.

FIRST OFFICER

Any contemporary of Richard Barksdale's surely would not have been surprised at his becoming the first of Winchester High School's African-American graduates to become an officer. An outstanding scholar (as well as athlete), he was voted "best all-round boy" of the Class of 1933 and applauded enthusiastically when he was awarded the first Mothers' Association Scholarship. He graduated with honors from Bowdoin College and was elected a member of Phi Beta Kappa. After the war, which interrupted his career as a college English teacher, he became the second African-American to earn a doctorate from Harvard University.



Once the United States entered the war broke, four Barksdale brothers entered the service. Richard, then a college instructor, entered the Army in March 1943 and was assigned as Personnel Sergeant Major in the administration office at Camp Stewart, Georgia.

Though qualified as a sharpshooter, he did not see combat. For most of 1944, he was "somewhere in the Pacific" – actually Hawaii where two friends from his home town spotted him in August on Maui leading an orchestra at an officer's dance. That December, he entered the Field Artillery Officer Candidate School, which he left as a 2nd lieutenant, Winchester's only known black officer during WWII.

SEGREGATED SERVICE

In 2006, the Winchester Historical Society recorded an interview with William "Robbie" Robinson, part of which pertained to his experiences in WWII.

“So in 1942, I received a message from the government,” he said, “and the message was to report to the army.” He was married with four children and needed the pay. He was inducted on June 20, 1942 and discharged on June 20, 1945.



*“Robbie” Robinson
in 1931*

“I went to Ft. Devens. Then from there, I went to ships in New York, Ft. Dix in New Jersey, and finally for basic training I had to take a train down to Alabama. And they started in New Jersey picking up these boys of color down through the North and South Carolina and Virginia and wound up in Anniston, Alabama, and took basic training.”

Many northern blacks had never experienced the segregation laws of the South. “I read about that in books, but now I experienced it in 1942. And the truck came at 4:30 in the morning, [it was] dark and it was the trucks from Ft. Dix to pick us up. Seven o’clock – it would be light now – I remember taking my big duffel bag and, like the rest, throw it in the truck [at] Fort McClellan, and this big black sergeant, he was a regular Army man, said, ‘Bags ride, you walk.’ That’s how I got a chance to walk and saw those signs.

“Well, I accepted that because that’s what the army teaches you, obey the rule, and that’s what I did. I endured it. Even in Ft. McClellan, had go to headquarters, they had signs up. The 1st and 2nd lieutenants were all white, and then the sergeants were all white. But I think Truman started to change that.

“The last formation we had in Ft. McClellan, five of us left behind and studied ammunition and all that.” Then he “went to Bampton, England [a staging point for invading the continent] for several months before D-Day. That’s where they were training us for the army supply.

“I was attached to ammunition, ordnance and ammunition that we delivered to the different ASP’s and supply points. I used to be in charge of making status stock reports to 1st Army headquarters just to keep track. Even coal. Of course I guess I had an IQ of 120 or something like that, but they needed us that’s why.”

He passed over the rest of his service during 1944 and 1945 when, assigned to the all-black 57th Ordnance Ammunition Company which supported Hodges First Army, Staff Sgt. Robinson endured the brutal conditions of Normandy, the Battle of the Bulge, and Rhineland.

Before leaving Ft. McClellan, he said, “they took five of us out and they said they would send us to officer’s school.” But he did not do it. “I had to go and prove I could make a difference.”

They all made a difference, though recognition may have been a long time coming. “In those days,” Robinson said, “they had just-black outfits. But things have changed. I have hope we can go further.”³

A HERO'S STORY

Of all the stars on the service flag at New Hope, only one changed to gold. That one was for Arthur Guy.

A Winchester native, Guy enlisted with the National Guard in Boston before the war. With three of his brothers, he was inducted into the army in March 1941, at age 22. Pvt. Guy went to Italy in the fall of 1944 with the Buffalo Soldiers' 371st Infantry. They arrived in November 1944, joining other divisions of the 92nd. Soon they were engaged in combat with the Germans, in battles for the Serchio Valley and subsequent actions in the Coastal Sector.

Early in 1945 came word that Guy was missing in action in Italy, and soon afterward it was confirmed that he had been killed in action on Feb. 11, 1945. According to a letter which an Army chaplain wrote to his mother, "your son, in a critical situation against the enemy, volunteered to stay behind and cover the withdrawal of his platoon to better prepared positions. He was discovered by the enemy and killed by machine gun fire.

"You have in the death of your son an example of valor, courage, and self-sacrifice. In attempting to save the lives of his comrades, he lost his own life. This last act, for which he has been recommended to be awarded the Silver Star for gallantry in action, will be a legend and a tradition to his friends who will always be inspired by his achievements."⁴

Later in 1945, he was, in fact, awarded the Silver Star for gallantry in action.

"COMPETENCE BRINGS RESPECT"

Among the prejudices African-Americans faced during the war, was disbelief that blacks could make good soldiers. At least one Winchester resident set about rectifying this attitude.

Before he became Massachusetts' governor, John A. Volpe served in the Navy during WWII. In 1942, being then age 33, he would not have been drafted, but he decided to enlist and accepted a commission in January 1943 as a lieutenant junior grade.

As told by biographer Kathleen Kilgore,⁵ that February he "was not flying into tropical sunsets over the Pacific but riding a crowded train south to Virginia into his first experience with legal segregation." After basic training, Volpe, whose civilian trade was construction, was assigned to stay at Camp Peary and train black sailors in a separate unit for work in construction battalions.



"Camp Peary was taking in as many as a hundred black men a month. Yet the Navy placed black sailors only as cooks and mess workers, so the excess trainees simply accumulated in boot

camp.... The white sailors had the drill hall six nights a week, the blacks one.... Whites had weekend passes...while the blacks were confined to the base....

“Volpe remembered the way Italians had been looked down on during his own childhood [in Wakefield and Malden]. The prejudices the other white officers took for granted unsettled him....

“Volpe convinced his superiors to build a new area with its own drill hall for the black sailors. He decided that the first step toward lessening racial tension would be to train black drill instructors (DIs)..... But he soon discovered that most of the men would never pass the exams for DIs because they were illiterate. He set up a basic literacy class, teaching it himself. The men proved to be unskilled mechanically as well, but Volpe rounded up enough recruits with construction backgrounds to start teaching carpentry, plumbing, and masonry in hopes of getting blacks placed into regular construction battalions. He had his men paint a sign – ‘Competence Brings Respect’ – and hang it in the drill hall.

“Of his first class of sixty black sailors, forty-eight graduated to become DIs.” Progress was slow, but in June 1944, before he left, “he had the satisfaction of seeing sailors he had trained forming a black stevedore battalion for duty in the Pacific (led by white construction officers who had been construction foremen before the war), as he had requested.”

An item from the Camp Peary log, quoted in *The Winchester Star* of April 14, 1944, stated, “Lt. Volpe has given the men that have gone through boot training here the best basic training in camp.... We have without a doubt won more competitive drill competitions than any area in Camp Peary and due to his efforts each and every man has the maximum amount of training.”

¹ This article © 2018 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Feb. Feb. 21, 2017. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

² *The Winchester Star*, Oct. 16, 1942

³ Interview of William H. Robinson by Randy Bairnsfather and Amy Grates, January 20, 2006.

⁴ *The Winchester Star*, Oct. 19, 1945

⁵ Kathleen Kilgore, *John Volpe : the life of an immigrant's son*, Yankee Books, 1987.