

# African American World War I soldiers served at a time racism was rampant in the U.S.

By **Michael E. Ruane** September 22, 2017 – *The Washington Post*



African American soldiers reading and relaxing in a Y.W.C.A. Hostess House in 1918. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress.)

The young African American soldier sits on a chair, his legs crossed, his right elbow resting on a table beside him. A vase of flowers sits on the table. An American flag leans in the background.

The soldier's heavy World War I uniform is buttoned up tight. He wears a broad-brimmed hat and has a single, small chevron of rank on his left sleeve.

As he gazes at the camera, he looks about 18. His name and fate are unknown.

But his century-old image is now available online, along with dozens of other pictures of African American soldiers from the Great War on the [website of the Library of Congress](#).

The library has digitized a newly donated batch of scarce images as part of its continuing exhibit on the centennial of the war, which stretched from 1914 to 1918. And some of the pictures will be added to its next rotation there in November.

There are about 50 photos, almost all of them of black soldiers during World War I. They include shots of men with rifles standing at attention, their lower legs wrapped in leggings called puttees.

There are elegant individual portraits and group shots. There are soldiers and sailors — the latter, in one picture, apparently engaged in some gambling enterprise.



Unidentified African American sailors playing a betting game. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress)

There's an unidentified regimental band — more than 40 strong — photographed while sitting in the grass with instruments and huge bass drum. The exact date and place are not known.

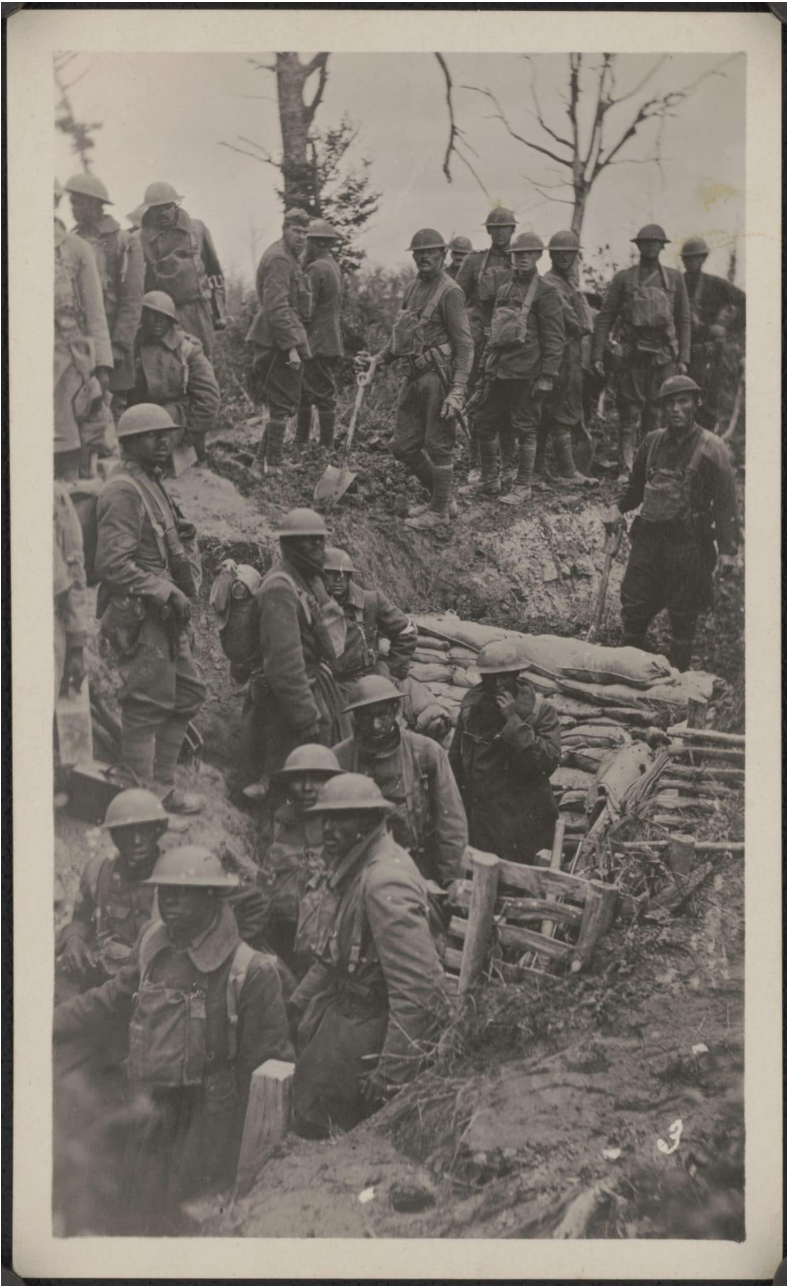
There's a class picture of Company C, 372nd Infantry Regiment, with what are probably its white officers.

Several men are pictured with American flags, at a time when violent racism was rampant in the United States.

“These are obviously people who are proud of serving their country,” said Ryan Reft, an historian in the library's manuscript division.

They are “demonstrating their citizenship, and their love for America, despite the fact that they are not receiving the rights that they had been promised according to the Constitution,” he said.

One picture shows men of Company A, 321st Labor Battalion, forming a “skirmish line” following a battle, with smashed buildings in the background.



The 302nd Engineer Regiment repairing a roadway over a trench. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress)

But they are armed with stretchers and ropes, rather than weapons, and are about to go search not for the enemy but for the bodies of dead.

One soldier wears gloves and has a pipe clenched in his mouth.

Between 370,000 and 400,000 African Americans served during World War I, Reft said. Most served as “stevedores, camp laborers, [and in] logistical support.” About 40,000 to 50,000 saw combat and about 770 were killed, he said.

Reft said one of the striking things about the pictures is that the men are in uniform.

“The fact that they even have uniforms, in some ways, is significant,” he said.

Often, especially in the South, black soldiers were required to “go out almost dressed as labor gangs, and not in uniform, because the military was afraid of offending white ... sensibilities,” he said.

“It’s literally dangerous to wear a uniform in some places,” he said. “And in some places [black soldiers] are attacked and forced to take them off.”

Overseas, where some of the pictures seem to have been taken, “they could wear that uniform, and be proud of being American in service and not worry about being targeted negatively,” he said.

The photographs were purchased this year and last year by Library of Congress benefactor and collector Tom Liljenquist, who had previously bought and donated hundreds of exquisite photographs of Civil War soldiers.

Liljenquist gave the new photos to the library earlier this year.

Known for his collection of Civil War images, Liljenquist said in a telephone interview Monday that the importance of the World War I pictures was pointed out to him by local author and photo historian Ronald S. Coddington.

Liljenquist said he purchased some of the images last year in Richmond. Then, last spring, he bought an album of more than 30 pictures that had been assembled by the late collectors Orton and Patricia Begner of Chili, N.Y.

“I snapped them right up,” he said. “They’re beautiful young men. The photographs are really nicely done and well composed.

“Here are these guys going out risking their lives for our country, and yet when they came home, those that did, they weren’t fully embraced by that country,” he said. “That’s what’s so haunting.”





Lieutenant Wesley Herbert Jamison of 351st Machine Gun Battalion, 92nd Infantry Division. (Courtesy of the Library of Congress)

Helena Zinkham, chief of the library's prints and photographs division, said the donation more than doubles the library's collection of black-soldier images from World War I.

Thirty-four of the new pictures are on postcards, she said.

Postcards were the rage in those days, and the soldiers probably got multiple copies of each one after sitting for a portrait, she said Monday. Alas, none bore addresses.

"The beauty of this postcard format is that it's an individual person," she said. "You're looking in more detail at a face. ... We didn't have many facial close-ups. And that's what we have now. The more individual personalities coming through."

In addition, she said, "we need to, want to, love to hear from people who might recognize" a long-forgotten relative.

One striking photo in the collection shows a young lieutenant named William Stuart Nelson, of the African American 92nd Infantry Division, which suffered over 1,600 killed and wounded in the closing days of the war.

Nelson would later become [a dean at Howard University](#), and an ally of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Indian statesman Mohandas K. Gandhi.

He would also become an international advocate for the philosophy of nonviolence.



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