

The History of the Twentieth Century
Episode 426
“Incomparably More Difficult”
Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

*The night is beautiful,
So the faces of my people.*

*The stars are beautiful,
So the eyes of my people.*

*Beautiful, also, is the sun.
Beautiful, also, are the souls of my people.*

Langston Hughes, “My People.”

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 426. Incomparably More Difficult.

Benjamin Oliver Davis was born on July 1, 1877 in Washington, D.C. He was known to his family as “Ollie.” His father, Louis Davis, worked as a messenger for the US Department of the Interior. His mother Henrietta was a nurse. He grew up in Washington and attended Washington High School, which at the time was a segregated high school for African-American students. Segregation is bad, but Washington High was also one of the first schools in the United States that offered a high school education to African-American students, so that’s something. Today the school is known as M Street High School.

Ollie Davis was a good student. He also played on the school’s baseball and football teams—he became captain of the football team. He also joined the school’s cadet program. This program organized students from each high school in the city into a quasi-military cadet unit; these units would then compete against each other in drilling, marksmanship, and such.

During his senior year, Ollie took classes at Howard University in Washington, and his parents’ dream was that their son would attend Howard after graduation, but Ollie was more interested in

becoming a soldier. In his senior year, he applied to the United States Military Academy at West Point. His father spoke to people he knew in the Interior Department to see if they would help his son gain admission, but he was unsuccessful. Ollie was not admitted to West Point; his father was told that appointing an African American to West Point was “not feasible.”

As an aside, the first African American was admitted to West Point in 1870. His name was James Smith. At the Academy, he was subject to constant harassment, hostility, and ostracism. He made it to his fourth year, but ultimately did not graduate.

In 1876, Cadet Johnson Whittaker entered the Academy. He also endured four years of mistreatment, culminating in a nighttime attack by three white cadets while he was sleeping in his dorm room. (He slept alone because the Academy wouldn't ask any white cadet to share a room with him.) His assailants tied him to his bed, beat him, slashed his face, threatened his life, and left him there, bound and bleeding and in his underwear. Whittaker reported the attack to the administration, which investigated the incident and concluded that Whittaker had staged the attack to get out of his final exams. He was court-martialed, convicted, expelled from the Academy, and imprisoned.

Two years later, his case came before President Chester Arthur, who ordered Whittaker's conviction reversed on the grounds of prosecutorial misconduct. He was released from prison, but West Point refused to readmit him, still insisting he had acted to avoid taking his exams. That was the end of his military career, although he would have two sons, Johnson Jr. and Miller Whittaker, who served as officers in the US Army during the First World War.

In 1995, Johnson Whittaker was granted a posthumous commission in the United States Army. At the ceremony, President Bill Clinton called his case “a great injustice.”

In fact, between 1870, when Cadet Smith entered the Academy, and 1898, when Benjamin O. Davis made his application, exactly 12 African Americans were admitted to West Point, and only three graduated and were awarded commissions in the United States Army. The first graduate was Henry Ossian Flipper, who graduated in 1877 and became the first Black officer of the Black 10th Cavalry Regiment, one of the units known as the Buffalo Soldiers. I have talked about them many times, beginning in episode 16.

Four years later, Lieutenant Flipper was accused of embezzlement and court-martialed. He was acquitted of the main charge, but convicted on the lesser charge of “conduct unbecoming an officer” and dismissed from the Army. He spent the rest of his life fighting unsuccessfully for reinstatement in the Army. In 1976, the Army issued Flipper a posthumous Honorable Discharge; in 1999, President Bill Clinton issued him a posthumous pardon from his court-martial conviction. In our time, West Point bestows an annual Henry O. Flipper Award to the graduating cadet who shows “perseverance in the face of unusual difficulties.”

The second was John Hanks Alexander, who graduated in 1887. Lieutenant Alexander was assigned to the 9th Cavalry Regiment, another unit of Buffalo soldiers, making him the first African American to hold a command position in the Army. In 1894, he was assigned to help establish a department of military science at Wilberforce University, an historically Black university, where he died unexpectedly a few months later, at the age of 30, from a ruptured aorta.

The third was Charles Young, who graduated in 1889. He also began his career as an officer in the 9th and then the 10th Cavalry Regiments. In 1894, he was assigned to teach military science at Wilberforce University along with Lieutenant Alexander. In 1903, then Captain Young became the first African American superintendent of a National Park, namely Sequoia and Kings Canyon. In 1904, the Army made him the first African-American military attaché, to Haiti.

In 1916, when the United States launched its Punitive Expedition into Mexico, following Pancho Villa's attack on Columbus, New Mexico (episode 119), then Major Young commanded a unit of the 10th Cavalry and became the first African-American officer to be promoted to colonel.

When the US entered the First World War in 1917, Colonel Young, as commander of a combat unit, stood a good chance of earning a promotion to general, which was problematic for the Wilson Administration, as such a promotion would inevitably lead to white officers among his subordinates. Many white Army officers at the time considered the prospect of receiving orders from a Black officer intolerable. The War Department chose instead to remove him from active duty, ostensibly because he suffered from high blood pressure. (Wouldn't you?) So he taught at Wilberforce University for two years. In 1919, after the war was over and the risk of him getting a promotion had passed, he was reinstated to active duty and again made military attaché to Liberia. He died of a kidney infection in 1922, at the age of 57.

In 2020, the governor of Young's home state of Kentucky, Andy Beshear, gave Young an honorary posthumous promotion to brigadier general and requested the US Department of Defense do the same. In 2022, the Department agreed and granted Young the promotion.

So, getting back to Benjamin O. Davis, at the time he made his application to West Point in 1898, only 12 African Americans had been admitted and only three graduated. Of the three graduates, one had been court-martialed, one had died unexpectedly, and most of General Young's accomplishments lay in the future. He was teaching at Wilberforce at this point.

The bottom line is that by the 1890s, West Point had instituted an unwritten policy of not admitting any more African American cadets, and so Benjamin Davis was not admitted. That policy would remain in place until 1932, when the Academy—

Well, put a pin in that. I'll come back to it, I promise. For now, consider the state of affairs when high school senior Benjamin Davis applied to West Point. Hitherto, the African American experience of West Point was pretty awful, while the West Point experience of African

Americans was horrific mistreatment bordering on grotesque. When the-powers-that-were denied Benjamin Davis admission, they probably told themselves they were doing him a favor. Who knows? Maybe they were.

Davis must have been disappointed, but while graduation from West Point may be the most prestigious way to get a commission in the United States Army, it is not the only way. By the time he graduated from high school, the Spanish-American War had been declared. Davis won a commission as lieutenant in the 8th US Volunteer Infantry Regiment, an African-American unit.

But the regiment was disbanded less than a year later, and with it went Lieutenant Davis's commission. His parents hoped now that he'd gotten that out of his system, he'd be ready to settle down and attend Howard University. No such luck for them. Three months after his old unit was disbanded, he enlisted in the 9th Cavalry Regiment, the Buffalo soldiers, as a private, intending to win a promotion to officer the hard way. Here is where he got his big break. The commander of his unit was Lieutenant Charles Young—that's the Charles Young I told you about a few minutes ago, the third African American to graduate from West Point and the first to go on to a real career in the Army. Davis shared with Young his dream of becoming an officer. Young encouraged Davis and helped him prepare for the officer candidate test.

Benjamin Davis was commissioned a second lieutenant in February 1901 and posted to the Philippines, where the Philippine-American war was then in progress. Lieutenant Davis was put in command of a platoon of the 10th Cavalry. His unit was posted to the island of Panay, as the garrison in the town of Lambunao.

Lieutenant Davis was well-liked by his soldiers and impressed his white superior officers, who competed with each other to get Davis assigned to their commands.

After the war, his unit returned to the United States, and Davis married Elnora Dickerson. He consistently earned excellent evaluations from his superiors and was promoted to first lieutenant in 1905. Soon after, he was assigned to...wait for it...to serve as a professor of military science at Wilberforce University.

Since it seems like every Black Army officer of this period got this assignment sooner or later, I should say a few words about the institution. Wilberforce University was and is an historically Black university, the third to be established in the United States and the first outside Pennsylvania and one of just four that has origins that predate the Civil War. It was founded in 1856 by two Methodist denominations, the mostly white Methodist Episcopal Church and the mostly Black African Methodist Episcopal Church, known as the AME. Wilberforce University was named after the late English politician and abolitionist William Wilberforce. Wilberforce University has maintained its affiliation with the AME since its inception.

Davis was not happy to be assigned a teaching position. He wanted to command a unit. Neither did he like working at a Methodist institution where he was expected to refrain from drinking

alcohol and to appear at Sunday services every week. Davis refused to do either and frequently clashed with the university's strong-willed president, businessman Joshua Jones. He and Elnora had their first child during this period, a daughter named Olive.

In 1909, the Army assigned Davis to the other job they gave Black officers in that day, military attaché to Liberia. He actually preceded Charles Young in this position. Young was at this time serving as attaché in Haiti. Young succeeded Davis in Liberia in 1912 and Davis returned to the US, where he and his wife had their second child, whom they named Benjamin O. Davis, Jr.

Davis and his cavalry unit patrolled the US-Mexico border for a time, during the period when the Mexican Revolution sometimes spilled across the frontier. In 1915, the Army promoted him to captain and sent him back to Wilberforce. The following year, his wife died giving birth to their third child, a daughter whom Davis named Elnora after her mother.

Davis served in the Philippines during the First World War. In 1920, he was promoted to lieutenant colonel and assigned to serve as a professor of military science at another historically Black university, Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, where he also commanded the school's reserve officers' training corps, or ROTC. In 1924, he became senior instructor of the Army's 372nd Infantry Regiment, part of the Ohio National Guard.

As you know from our episodes on the First World War, many African Americans served in France. The experience of fighting for their country, of military training, and of a country, France, where, though not completely free of racism, segregation was unknown and Black people could go anywhere they pleased. You also know how those veterans returned to the US with a new outlook, one that was not welcomed in certain corners of the country, where Black veterans were sometimes attacked by whites for daring to wear their Army uniforms in public.

In 1925, the Army War College published a report reviewing the performance of Black soldiers during the war. The report declared that Black soldiers had smaller brains and were mentally inferior to white soldiers. It also said that African Americans were by nature docile, subservient, cowardly, and had difficulty grasping basic moral principles.

So were taught a whole generation of white Army officers, the officers who served in the Second World War. The Army discouraged African Americans from enlisting in peacetime. During the war, one in ten American soldiers was Black, which reflected the proportions of the civilian population. By 1937, African Americans numbered less than 2% of the US Army.

As for officers, well, there were dozens of Black US Army officers during the Civil War, the Spanish-American War, and the First World War, but they were all mustered out when those wars ended. Discounting times of war, from the end of the Civil War in 1865 to the beginning of the Second World War in 1939, a period of about 74 years, there were never more than four active-duty officers in the US Army who were Black. And for more than half that period, one of the four was Benjamin O. Davis, Sr.

It's safe to assume Colonel Davis was aware of the Army War College report when it was released in 1925. It is unclear whether his now 12-year-old son and namesake, Benjamin Jr., knew anything of it. If he did, he did not allow it to deter him from his own ambition, which was to follow in his father's footsteps and become an officer in the United States Army. Only young Benjamin aspired to reach his goal in the manner denied his father: as a graduate of West Point.

The following year, 1926, Colonel Davis arranged for Benjamin his first ride in an airplane at the Anacostia Experimental Flying Field in Anacostia, Virginia, near Washington. That's a pretty fancy name for a dirt landing strip. We're speaking here of a biplane, one of those Curtis Jenny types with two seats and an open cockpit. Wind gusts laced with the smell of gasoline blew into the teenager's face as the pilot seated behind him took off. Young Benjamin looked down and saw below him people, cars, and buildings shrink until they were the size of toys. The biplane climbed into the clouds, the pilot banked sharply and the plane dropped before circling around and landing. With shaking knees, the 13-year-old climbed out of the plane and amended his ambition. He was not merely going to be an Army officer and a West Point graduate. He was going to be an Army officer and a West Point graduate who served in the US Army Air Corps.

Benjamin Jr. graduated from Central High School in Cleveland, Ohio in 1929, at the age of 16. He studied at Western Reserve University in Cleveland and then at the University of Chicago, but his eyes were still on West Point. He got his break in 1932, when he was sponsored by a Member of Congress, a Chicago Republican named Oscar De Priest. De Priest was first elected to Congress in 1928, becoming the first African American in Congress in the twentieth century, and in 1932, when he sponsored Benjamin Davis, still the only African American in Congress.

Fittingly, the first African-American in Congress in the twentieth century sponsored the first African-American cadet admitted to West Point in the twentieth century, as well as the first African-American cadet admitted since his own father was denied admission 34 years earlier.

I told you I'd come back to it.

Benjamin Jr. ran into the same kind of mistreatment at West Point that his predecessors had endured, but he stuck it out and graduated in June 1936. This made him the fourth African American to graduate from the Academy, and the first since Charles Young in 1889. Alas, Colonel Young died in 1922 and did not live to see this day. The Academy yearbook for that year praised Davis for his "courage, tenacity, and intelligence with which he conquered a problem incomparably more difficult than plebe year..." One doesn't have to stretch one's imagination too far to guess what that "incomparably more difficult" problem was.

One month after Benjamin O. Davis Jr. graduated from West Point and received his commission as a lieutenant in the United States Army, three thousand miles to the east, a group of army officers from a different military began a coup to overthrow their democratically elected government, an event that triggered the Spanish Civil War.

[music: Sousa, "The United States Field Artillery."]

James Mercer Langston Hughes was born on February 1, 1901 in Joplin, Missouri. He was Black, but he had white and Native ancestors, which is not unusual for African-Americans. Fun Fact: Langston Hughes was a distant cousin to Muhammad Ali. Another fun fact: both Langston Hughes and Muhammad Ali are distant relations to your humble podcaster.

Langston Hughes, as he would commonly be known, grew up in the Midwest. His father left shortly after he was born, but his mother and her family were well educated and instilled in the boy a love of books and a strong sense of racial identity.

Like Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., Langston Hughes attended Central High School in Cleveland, Ohio, though he graduated before Davis got there. While still in high school, Hughes began writing poetry, short stories, and plays. He enrolled in Columbia University in 1921, but left after a year of enduring the racist hostility of his classmates. He worked for a time as a merchant seaman, visiting Africa and Europe, before returning to the United States and entering Lincoln University, an historically Black university in Pennsylvania. In 1927, Hughes toured the South with African-American anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston. He was shocked by the intensity of the racism in that part of the country.

He graduated from Lincoln University in 1929. Afterward, Hughes lived in Harlem, where he was an important figure in the Harlem Renaissance. His first book of poetry, *The Weary Blues*, was published in 1926. His first novel, *Not Without Laughter*, was published in 1930.

In 1932, Langston Hughes led a group of African Americans to the Soviet Union to participate in a joint Soviet-German film project titled *Black and White*, which was meant to examine racism in the United States. You may recall that I talked about Langston Hughes and this project in episode 313.

The film was never made, and most of the Americans involved returned to America. Langston Hughes remained in the USSR for more than a year. He visited Moscow and Leningrad and encountered zero racism, which left him favorably impressed. Then he toured Soviet Central Asia and gained a very different impression. The oppression of the peoples of this region, such as the Kazakhs and Uzbeks, by ethnic Russians struck Hughes as eerily similar to the racism against Black people in the American South. When he returned to the United States he wrote about the parallel and advocated for an international approach to the fight against racism. He also published his first short story collection, *The Ways of White Folks*, in 1934.

The following year, 1935, was a big year for Langston Hughes. He applied for and received a Guggenheim Fellowship. It was also a big year for Cadet Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. He was beginning his senior year at West Point and got to ride in an airplane for the second time in his life as part of his Academy training. He applied for a place in the Army Air Corps. He aspired to become the first Black fighter pilot in the American military, but it was not to be. His application

was rejected. The US Army Air Corps was absolutely, entirely 100% white, and the Army intended to keep it that way.

The year 1935 was also an eventful year in the history of fascism. In October, Italy invaded Ethiopia. In November, Germany enacted the Nuremberg Laws.

The invasion of Ethiopia, the last independent native African nation, stirred outrage among African Americans. Black Americans raised money for Ethiopia. Langston Hughes published a poem titled “The Ballad of Ethiopia.” *The Norfolk Journal*, a Black newspaper, predicted that “[u]nless there is a succession of miracles, the first bomb that Italy drops on Ethiopia will be the signal for another World War.”

A month later came the Nuremberg Laws in Germany. As I explained in episode 291, the Nazi government studied race laws in America as a model for the Nuremberg Laws, which stripped Jewish Germans of their civil rights. The Nazi response to criticism of these laws was to point out that they were milder than many of the race laws in the United States, and everyone praises the United States as a paragon of democracy and equality, don’t they?

You can imagine how this argument was received among African Americans. While most Americans in the 1930s disapproved of the Nazis, I think it is safe to say that, apart from Jewish Americans, no ethnic group in the United States was more hostile to Nazism than were African Americans, who saw clearly that something was rotten in the state of Germany. More than that, they saw clearly that Nazi ideology was not only a problem for Europeans. As Langston Hughes put it, African Americans “do not have to be told what Fascism is in action. We know. Its theories of Nordic supremacy...have long been realities to us.”

As you know from our episodes on the Spanish Civil War, more than 30,000 foreigners from many nations volunteered to fight for the Spanish Republic. Among them were nearly 3,000 Americans, organized into the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. Among them were 80 or so African Americans.

This last statistic fascinated Langston Hughes. He wondered what motivated Black Americans to travel thousands of miles from home to fight in someone else’s civil war. He’d also heard that the Abraham Lincoln Brigade was integrated. Its Black members were not relegated to serving meals or driving trucks. They fought on the front lines right alongside everyone else.

The purpose of a Guggenheim Fellowship is to support artists so they can pursue their art. Langston Hughes was a writer, and this is what he wanted to write about. Hughes was a well-known name by this time, so he had little difficulty landing a position at the *Baltimore Afro-American* newspaper as their war correspondent.

He used money from the paper and from his fellowship to travel to Spain and, like Ernest Hemingway, like George Orwell, to see the war for himself.

He sailed from New York to Cherbourg aboard RMS *Aquitania* in July 1937. He stopped first in Paris, where there had been for some time an expatriate African-American community in Montmartre, sometimes called “Little Harlem.” There Hughes spent a month, reading his poems and discussing fascism with writers and artists from across Europe and America. Then he took a train from Paris to Barcelona, where he experienced an air raid his first night. He spent some time in Madrid, then under siege, as the guest of a group of antifascist intellectuals. (Should I call them “antifa?”)

A tip from a fellow war correspondent, Pulitzer-Prize recipient Leland Stowe of the *Chicago Daily News*, led him to an encampment of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade not far from Madrid. There he spoke with African American soldiers and sent home dispatches on them and the war they fought. In October, he met a 23-year-old nurse named Salaria Kea, the only African-American nurse to serve in the Spanish Civil War. She had previously been head nurse at Seaview Hospital in New York City and there had met and spoken with Jewish doctors who were refugees from Nazi Germany, so she got a first-hand account of German anti-Semitism. When Mussolini invaded Ethiopia, Kea organized a fundraising campaign to send hospital equipment to the Ethiopians.

When the Spanish Civil War began, Kea volunteered to serve with the American Red Cross mission in Spain. She was turned down because of her race, but the Abraham Lincoln Brigade was happy to have her. In Spain she supervised white nurses and treated patients of many European nationalities, neither of which would have been possible in the United States. Kea and her fellow nurses worked in difficult conditions. She told Hughes how lack of medical supplies forced her nurses to wash and boil old bandages and reuse them on new patients.

Hughes visited a Republican training camp, where he met 23-year-old Captain Walter Garland. Garland was born in Brooklyn and served two years in the US Army as a private in the early Thirties. He’d studied math at Brooklyn College and worked as a music arranger for the NBC radio program *Your Hit Parade*. Garland joined the Communist Party in 1936 and in 1937 volunteered to fight in Spain.

Less than two months after he’d arrived, he was shot and seriously wounded. Upon his recovery, he was given an officer’s commission. He soon rose to the rank of captain and was in charge of training the newly raised Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion, formed from Canadian volunteers, although there were a fair number of Americans serving in the unit as well.

Langston Hughes was astonished by the sight of a Black officer commanding white soldiers, who took his orders without resistance. Hughes couldn’t help but to contrast what he saw in Spain to the army back home, where Black soldiers were kept strictly segregated from white soldiers, where Black officers were practically nonexistent, and where more elite services, like the US Army Air Corps or the Marine Corps, excluded Black soldiers altogether.

With regard to the Marines, the United States had Black Marines serving during the Revolutionary War, but no African American had been a Marine since 1777. Lieutenant General Thomas Holcomb, the Commandant of the United States Marine Corps from 1936-1943, once said that he'd rather command a Marine Corps of 5,000 white Marines, than one made up of 50,000 African-American Marines.

Hughes sent home reports profiling some of the African-American soldiers he met, profiles which were read and discussed by hundreds of thousands of people back home. Hughes also wrote poetry about the war, often in the voice of a Black soldier. One such poem reads in part:

*Folks over here don't treat me
Like white folks used to do.
When I was home they treated me
Just like they treatin' you.*

As to the question of what motivated them, Hughes reported on that, too. For a number of volunteers, like Salaria Kea, it was the invasion of Ethiopia that served as a wake-up call, one that made plain the link between fascism and racism. One soldier was quoted as saying, "I wanted to go to Ethiopia and fight Mussolini... This ain't Ethiopia, but it'll do." Another shared with Hughes his conviction that a victory for the Nationalists in Spain would embolden the racists in America and make life worse for African Americans. Hughes himself wrote, "Give Franco a hood and he would be a member of the Ku Klux Klan."

Perhaps it was best summed up by the soldier who told Hughes that Spain offered Black Americans a rare opportunity: to fight against racism with guns and bullets, in his words "to strike a blow at the counterparts of those who oppress us at home."

Or, as Hughes put it in another of his poems:

*Just now I'm goin;
To take a Fascist town.
Fascists is Jim Crow peoples, honey—
And here we shoot 'em down.*

Hughes returned to the United States and went on a speaking tour promoting the Republican cause in Spain. So did Salaria Kea. So did Walter Garland. They warned their American audiences that a Nationalist victory in Spain would lead to another war in Europe.

The Nationalists did win, and as America prepared for that possibility, of another world war, those preparations raised questions among African Americans, who were among the staunchest of antifascists, who saw in the war against fascism a reflection of their own struggles at home, yet were being told their services were not required.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening and I'd like to thank Richard for his kind donation, and thank you to Leonard for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Richard and Leonard help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone always, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, you are most welcome; just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

As always, the podcast website also contains notes about the music used on the podcast. If you hear a piece of music on the podcast and you would like to know more about it, including the composer, the performers, and a link to where you can download it, that would be the place to go. While you're there, you can leave a comment and let me know what you thought about today's show.

The end of the year holidays are upon us again; this is the time of year when I remind you that donations and patronages to support *The History of the Twentieth Century* make the perfect holiday gift, for me. This year marked the tenth anniversary of the podcast, so if you'd like to help me celebrate, a donation to the podcast is an excellent way.

And I hope you'll join me next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we continue the story of segregation in the United States military, and look at what happened when the US instituted its first peacetime draft and then went to war. Half American, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Salaria Kea would meet and treat an injured Irish soldier named John O'Reilly. A few weeks later they were married. She was wounded and returned to the US in 1938. Her husband followed her in 1940. She became something of a celebrity among African-Americans, yet the couple experienced racist hostility in the US for the rest of their lives, not least because of their mixed marriage. She would later say that her time in Spain was the best of her life, because it was the only time she was free from racism. Salaria Kea O'Reilly died in 1990 at the age of 76.

[music: Closing War Theme]