

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 427

### “Half American”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

“Should I sacrifice my life to live half American...? Would it be demanding too much to demand full citizenship rights in exchange for the sacrificing of my life? Is the kind of America I know worth defending?”

Letter to the editor, *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 1941.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 427. Half American.

I want to continue today from where I left off last time. As a reminder: when I left off, African-American volunteers were fighting in integrated military units in the Spanish Civil War, while at home, the US Army and the Marine Corps had taken the official position that Black soldiers were inferior.

The US Army had exactly four Black officers, and two of them were named Benjamin Oliver Davis. The junior of the two had just graduated from the United States Military Academy, an opportunity his father was denied. The younger Davis was the fourth African American ever to graduate from West Point, and the first in the twentieth century.

Following his graduation, Benjamin Jr. received his commission as second lieutenant. His first assignment was to the 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, one of the original Buffalo Soldiers units, based in Fort Benning, Georgia.

As you may have noticed from the previous episode, the Army was inclined to assign Black officers to its segregated Black units. A major reason was to avoid a situation in which a white soldier would have to take orders from a Black superior officer. This issue came up during the last war with Colonel Charles Young, the highest ranking African-American officer ever in the US Army at that time. A white lieutenant from Mississippi objected to serving under a Black

superior officer and protested to the Secretary of War, Newton Baker, requesting a transfer. Baker told the lieutenant that if he didn't feel he was able to do his duty, he could always resign. The lieutenant was not satisfied with this answer and brought the matter to his Senator, Democrat John Sharp Williams, who raised the issue with President Wilson, who ordered the lieutenant be given his transfer. Soon after, and over his vehement objection, the Army found Colonel Young medically unfit due to high blood pressure. (Gee, I wonder what gave him high blood pressure.) Conveniently, this allowed the Army to avoid promoting him to general.

This incident illustrates why Black officers like Davis got assigned to Black units like the 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry, which, as I indicated, was stationed at Fort Benning, Georgia. Georgia was not the ideal place for a young Black man to be assigned in 1936. Some truly terrible things happened to Black soldiers at Fort Benning in the Thirties, but happily not to Lieutenant Davis, although he was the only officer at Fort Benning who was barred from the officers' club.

After a year at Fort Benning, Davis underwent training at the US Army infantry school. He was then assigned to teach military science at the historically black college Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. You may recall his father once drew the same assignment. A teaching assignment at an historically black college or university was the other posting the Army could give a Black officer that would avoid any possibility they'd end up in command of a white soldier.

Lieutenant Davis took up his new position at Tuskegee Institute in 1937. A year later came the Sudetenland Crisis. I said last time that African Americans were among the staunchest anti-Nazi ethnic groups in the United States. To give you a bit of flavor, here is how the *New York Amsterdam News* described the Munich Agreement: "Four gangsters met last week to divide the property of an innocent victim." Langston Hughes compared what happened to Czechoslovakia to a lynching.

Two months afterward, in January 1939, President Roosevelt requested from Congress funding to increase the size of the US Army Air Corps fourfold, from 1,400 planes to 6,000. But the new Air Corps would be all white, or "lily-white," as *the Pittsburgh Courier* put it, same as the old Air Corps. Air Corps commander General Henry Arnold explained to his staff that the Corps could not have Black pilots because pilots were officers. Black officer pilots would therefore be giving orders to white enlisted personnel and such an arrangement would be "impossible." That's his word.

Long-time listeners may remember that in the 1920s, the Treaty of Versailles prohibited Germany from establishing an air force. So the Germans did the next best thing—they created programs to train civilian airplane pilots. This way, the German government could deny any military purpose to the training, but in the event Germany created an air force at some time in the future, it would already have a cadre of trained pilots ready to serve. In the spring of 1939, the United States did something similar. Congress passed and President Roosevelt signed the Civilian Pilot Training Act, which set up a US government program to train civilian pilots.

Unlike Germany, the US made no bones about what the program was for; it was to train still more pilots who could become available in the event of war.

When this bill came before the House of Representatives, African Americans lobbying to train Black pilots persuaded a Republican Member of Congress from Illinois named Everett Dirksen to attach an amendment that prohibited racial discrimination in the program. The amendment passed, the bill passed, and within weeks America was training Black pilots.

Many of these training programs were affiliated with American colleges and universities, both predominantly white schools and, in the case of Black pilots, the historically black ones. Howard University had such a program, and can you guess what other school did? That's right: Tuskegee Institute. You're way ahead of me.

In fact, at the end of the first training year, the entire class at Tuskegee passed. That was more than could be said of programs based at segregated white universities in the South, like the University of North Carolina or Georgia Tech.

But it must have been a bittersweet moment for Lieutenant Benjamin O. Davis, still teaching military science at Tuskegee. Not five miles away, a group of other young Black men were achieving what he had dreamed of since he was thirteen. They were able to live his dream because they were civilians, while he was still barred from flying because of his Army uniform. Fate can be cruel, sometimes.

Naturally, Davis was far from being the only African American who was unhappy about the limitations the Army put on training opportunities for Black soldiers. Newspapers like the *Courier* that served an African-American readership, civil rights organizations like the NAACP, and Black intellectuals like Langston Hughes were clamoring for more Black involvement in the US military.

You may remember from episode 204 how important the First World War was to the story of civil rights in America. Large numbers of African-American soldiers served in France, where there was no such thing as segregation, and came home hailed as heroes. Military service generally teaches self-esteem and self-reliance, and Black veterans came home proud of their uniforms and with a renewed commitment to fight for equality.

It was an eye-opening experience for many white Americans, who learned that African Americans could and would fight as hard for their country as any other Americans. Shouldn't those who put their lives on the line for America be accorded all the rights of American citizenship?

But not all white Americans thought that way, as evidenced by the nationwide outburst of racial violence directed against African Americans in the summer of 1919, the Red Summer. Black veterans were sometimes assaulted for the crime of wearing their uniforms in public. There was

an upsurge in lynchings, with at least seven cases of Black men lynched while wearing their US Army uniforms.

Afterward, there was clearly an effort by the American military to purge the ranks of Black soldiers, with their percentage plunging from 10% at the end of the war to 2.5% by the mid-Thirties. With another world war looming, Black Americans wanted full participation in the military. They wanted better treatment of African Americans in the military. And they wanted an end to race discrimination in the military.

In the summer of 1940, as you know, the US Congress debated the Selective Service Act, which would become the first peacetime draft in American history. Charles Hamilton Houston, special counsel to the NAACP and a First World War veteran himself, testified before a Congressional committee that African Americans “want some of the democracy they fought for in 1917 this time, and the sooner the better.”

The issue at hand was a proposed antidiscrimination amendment to be attached to the bill, which passed in spite of fierce resistance from Southern Members. Roosevelt signed the bill, and some 1.5 million young Black American men were now eligible for conscription.

But that meant conscription into a segregated military. And although the Selective Service Act theoretically applied equally, the Act also contained language requested by the military, that declared no one would be inducted if the military could not make adequate provision for such things as housing, sanitary facilities, and medical care. That gave them a huge loophole. The Army could turn away Black draftees simply by not providing adequate segregated facilities for Black soldiers. Thousands of African Americans attempted to enlist in the Army in the months following passage of the Act, only to be told the Army would not take them because it did not have facilities for them.

There was also the matter of the local draft boards. These boards determined who was fit for service and who was not; who was eligible for a deferment and who was not. And only a tiny fraction of these boards had even one Black member. A study by the NAACP uncovered draft boards across the country that openly refused to induct any African American.

Recruits who got past the draft board next had to take the Army’s General Classification Test. Black applicants failed this test at higher rates than white applicants, though a study conducted at Columbia University in 1953, after the war, showed that 90% of the failed applicants had come from segregated schools in the south, which were...not very good. Many white Southerners also were poorly educated and failed the test, but for them the Army was generous in granting exemptions, while the rules were strictly enforced against Black recruits.

And then there was the Navy, where, as you know, Black sailors could serve only as mess attendants, meaning they were effectively “sea-going bellhops, chambermaids, and dishwashers.” Those aren’t my words. Those words come from a letter of complaint fifteen

African American sailors sent to the *Pittsburgh Courier*. When the letter came to the attention of the Navy, they leapt into action. They gave the fifteen signatories dishonorable discharges.

And then there was the, as they say, “lily-white” Army Air Corps, the barrier to pilot training that so bedeviled Lieutenant Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. African Americans were aware. The NAACP magazine *The Crisis* in its July 1940 issue ran a cover with a photo of an American fighter plane in flight, and underneath it the words “For Whites Only.” Inside was an article titled “When Do *We* Fly?” written by James Lincoln Holt Peck, who had served in the air force of the Spanish Republic during the Spanish Civil War, where he had qualified as an “ace” after downing five enemy planes, two German and three Italian.

An editorial in the *Pittsburgh Courier* noted that African Americans “cannot FLY Uncle Sam’s planes. They cannot SERVICE Uncle Sam’s planes. They cannot MAKE Uncle Sam’s planes. The only thing they CAN do and are compelled to do is PAY for Uncle Sam’s planes.”

The US had a Presidential election in autumn of 1940. President Roosevelt was running for an unprecedented third term, and Republican candidate Wendell Willkie was running a campaign strong enough to put a scare into him. In 1936, Franklin Roosevelt had become the first Democratic Presidential candidate to win a majority of the Black vote, but that was out of appreciation for the New Deal generally rather than for any action Roosevelt had taken on civil rights. FDR had not even endorsed a Federal anti-lynching bill, a perennial proposal that never got past Southern Senators. Nor had he ended discrimination in Federal employment, which had been in place since the Wilson Administration.

In the North, the Democratic Party was increasingly embracing the cause of civil rights and wooing African American voters, but the South was a key source of political support for any Democratic President, and for a Democrat, alienating white Southern voters amounted to political suicide. Sensing an opening, the Republicans put into their platform a call for an end to discrimination in the armed services and in civilian Federal employment.

In September 1940, in the midst of these controversies, the United States Army, expanding after the influx of draftees created by the Selective Service Act, announced the promotions of 84 colonels to the rank of brigadier general. One name on the promotion list was conspicuous by its absence: that of Colonel Benjamin O. Davis, Sr., the Army’s highest-ranking Black soldier. The African-American newspapers noticed. The Republicans piled on, buying ads in those papers calling attention to the slight: “What chance have [Black] draftees when Roosevelt decrees... WHITE OFFICERS ONLY!”

A week before the election, after exchanges of messages between the White House, the War Department, and the Army, a revised promotion list appeared, this time with Davis’s name on it. Its absence from the earlier list was due to a clerical error, the Army explained, rather lamely.

America's first Black general was front-page news in the African-American papers, and despite predictions that General Davis would be shunted aside, he was given command of the 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade, 2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Division, based at Ft. Riley, Kansas. The 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade was an African-American unit that included the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiments, those Buffalo Soldiers units that keep appearing in this story.

You can imagine how Captain Davis must have felt on hearing the news. Happy for his father, certainly. Proud of his father and his role as a trail-blazer in the United States Army, for sure. It is likely he also mused on how his father's promotion might make it a little easier to be a Black officer in the US Army, particularly if your name was also Benjamin O. Davis.

Roosevelt won the election, and as 1941 dawned, well, I'll let Benjamin Davis Jr. tell you in his own words, as he looked back on this moment from later in his life: "In 1941, the Army still regarded all Blacks as totally inferior to whites, somewhat less than human, and certainly incapable of contributing positively to its combat mission... [Still,] for the first time, I saw vague possibilities for a military career that could go beyond assignments as a professor of military science and tactics at Black colleges."

In fact, Captain Davis's career moved beyond academic assignments just weeks after his father was assigned command of the 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade. He himself was transferred from his teaching post at Tuskegee Institute to Ft. Riley, to serve as an aide...to his father.

But just a few weeks after that, Captain Davis was reassigned again. In early 1941, President Roosevelt ordered the Army Air Corps to form a Black fighter squadron. The Corps established one at Tuskegee, where they knew they already had a pool of trained pilots to draw from, and soon after that squadron was formed. General Davis received a request from "Hap" Arnold, the Air Corps commander. Would he be willing to release his aide for fighter training at Tuskegee? General Davis consented, and in May Captain Davis was back in Tuskegee, this time not as a teacher, but to fulfill his dream of becoming an Army fighter pilot.

[music: "The Air Force Song."]

Thoroughgood Marshall was born in Baltimore, Maryland on July 2, 1908. He graduated in 1925 with honors from what was then called the Baltimore Colored High and Training School. (Today it is known as Frederick Douglass High School.) Afterward he studied at Lincoln University—Langston Hughes was one of his classmates—and graduated in 1930 with a degree in literature and philosophy.

He then enrolled in Howard University School of Law, where the dean of Howard Law, Charles Hamilton Houston, became his mentor. He graduated from law school in 1933, first in his class. When Houston became special counsel to the NAACP, Marshall became his assistant. When Houston left the NAACP to start his own law firm, Marshall succeeded him as special counsel and became a high-profile civil rights lawyer.

The nondiscrimination provision in the Selective Service Act had seemed like a victory at the time it was made into law, but by 1941, the downside became apparent, and to no one more so than Thurgood Marshall. Letters were pouring into his office from disillusioned Black soldiers describing the racism endemic to Army service.

Many of the letter writers had lived all their lives in the North; when the Army sent them to postings in the South, they got their first taste of Southern segregation, both off the post and on it. Soldiers regularly endured racial slurs, even from their own officers, who also felt free to hit their soldiers, even though that was supposedly a court-martial offense.

When Black soldiers went into town on leave, the treatment was even worse. Locals reacted in anger to the very sight of a Black man in an Army uniform. When leave was over, white military police made Black soldiers wait in a separate line for the bus back to the post. The white soldiers got first priority, which meant Black soldiers had to stand in line for hours, watching bus after bus picking up white soldiers, before they got their own rides.

In February 1941, a 19-year-old Black private from the 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry at Fort Benning named Felix Hall was reported missing. This is the same unit that Benjamin Davis Jr. had been assigned to five years earlier. Hall was found dead a month later, in a nearby wood, hanging by his neck from a tree, his wrists and ankles bound with wire. In March 1941, another soldier from the 24<sup>th</sup> was shot dead on the post. No one was ever prosecuted for either murder.

White officers often told Black soldiers that the difficulties they suffered were their own fault. They were guests in the South and had to abide by the local customs.

One particularly appalling incident occurred in the summer of 1941, when an Army construction battalion of about 1500 Black soldiers participated as part of a larger formation in a training exercise in rural Arkansas. One evening, as a group of several hundred soldiers were marching along a highway toward a new campsite, they were accosted by state police and armed civilians.

The police ordered the soldiers to get off the highway and march in the muddy ground along the side of the road, evidently because they were offended at the idea of Black soldiers' boots touching a white man's highway. When one of the unit's officers, a white man from Wisconsin, protested the police use of racial epithets, a police officer slapped the lieutenant across the face, called him a "damn Yankee," and told him his uniform and his rank meant nothing in Arkansas. When another white Army officer moved to intervene, a second police officer stuck the barrel of his shotgun into the officer's stomach and told him if he moved, he would be a dead man.

There was nothing they could do but comply with the order. When the soldiers reached their campsite, many of them expressed fear that they would be ambushed while they slept. Two hundred of them decided for their own safety to change into civilian clothes and sneak out of the campsite one by one in various directions. They hopped trains or hitchhiked back to their home base, Ft. Custer in Michigan.

One of the soldiers wrote to the NAACP, where Walter White, the organization's leader, publicized the incident, and Thurgood Marshall took up the legal work. I say legal work because the Army chose to court-martial the six leaders of the group that went AWOL from their encampment. Their case became a cause célèbre; they were represented at their court martial by Major Theophilus Mann, the first African-American military lawyer to serve as defense counsel in an Army court martial. He was assisted by Thurgood Marshall. Happily, the six soldiers were acquitted. Two years later, in 1943, this construction unit would be assembling Bailey bridges in Italy.

Meanwhile, in Alabama, on March 7, 1942, the first five Black pilots graduated from the Air Corps training program at Tuskegee. One of them was Major Benjamin O. Davis, who had achieved his dream at last. Along the way, he became the first Black soldier to fly an airplane solo for the Army.

What came next for Major Davis was a lot of waiting. Many more pilots would need to be trained before there were enough to form a squadron. The waiting was made no easier by the post's new commander, who strictly enforced racial segregation on and off the post. Davis himself called the post a "prison camp for Black servicemen."

Still, there was joy in flight. When the Tuskegee pilots flew formations or practiced maneuvers in their P-40s, imagining themselves locked in combat with Me-109s or Zeroes, their earthbound woes seemed far away. They were eager to be deployed overseas, not least because they'd be leaving Jim Crow behind.

Several months later, Tuskegee's first full fighter squadron, designated the 99<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadron, was declared fit for duty. They were sent to North Africa soon after, under the command of Colonel Benjamin O. Davis. During Operation Husky, they patrolled the skies, escorted bombers, and sometimes dropped a few bombs themselves. A pilot with the 99<sup>th</sup> shot down their first German plane on July 2. His name was Lieutenant Charles Hall, and when he returned to base, he was treated to a chilled bottle of Coca-Cola, that was being kept on ice for the first pilot who scored a kill.

Lieutenant Hall became an instant hero in the African-American community back home. The US military's newspaper, *Stars and Stripes*, dubbed the 99<sup>th</sup> the "Black Angels" and chortled that Adolf Hitler must be "unable to bear the thought of [Black pilots] squashing Nazis like bugs." General Eisenhower visited the unit to congratulate Hall personally.

Alas, the celebration was marred by the news that the 99<sup>th</sup> lost two of its own in that same engagement, the unit's first casualties.

On July 10, the unit flew cover for the American landings on Sicily. The mix of emotions the pilots of the 99<sup>th</sup> were feeling must have been overwhelming. Elation from the sense that they were finally contributing something tangible to the war against the Nazis competed with the jolt

of fear that came every time a German plane appeared in the sky. As their accomplishments mounted and their fame grew, they also felt the pressure that came from knowing that the future of African Americans in the Air Forces, indeed in the military, depended upon their unit's performance. They were pioneers in the quest for equality, on the same level as Jesse Owens or Joe Louis or Marian Anderson.

But racism remained a daily reality. The 33<sup>rd</sup> Fighter Group, of which their squadron was a part, was otherwise all white, and its commander did not want a Black squadron in his group. When the 99<sup>th</sup> began to achieve notoriety, he began assigning them to less important escort tasks, while the white units were flying over mainland Italy. For Colonel Benjamin Davis, it brought back painful memories from West Point.

In September, the commander submitted a report declaring that the 99<sup>th</sup> was "not of the fighting caliber of any [other] squadron in the group" and recommended that it be redeployed to coastal defense. The report was leaked to *Time* magazine, which printed an article questioning whether the experiment of training Black soldiers to be pilots was panning out.

Colonel Davis had been recalled to the United States to take command of a larger unit, the 332<sup>nd</sup> Fighter Group. Now he was called to the Pentagon to discuss the 99<sup>th</sup>'s future. Deploying the calm, logical demeanor he had learned to use at West Point, he defended the unit in a meeting with Assistant Secretary of War John McCloy. He told McCloy that his unit had not been in combat for long, but had proved themselves quick learners. He also noted that pilots of the 99<sup>th</sup> had been flying more sorties than most other Army squadron and that the 99<sup>th</sup> had done everything the Army had asked of them.

The pilots of the 99<sup>th</sup> were angry. One of them later said, "I was proud of what I was doing, and I did it well. I resented that even the War Department considered us an 'experiment.' Here I was, fighting for my country, and I was just an 'experiment!'"

The War Department began a study of the performance of the 99<sup>th</sup>, but it was not that study that vindicated the unit; it was the Anzio invasion. The 99<sup>th</sup> flew air cover for the landing and shot down 12 German planes in two days. When the War Department study came back, it concluded that the performance of the 99<sup>th</sup> was comparable to that of white units. Even *Time* magazine changed its tune after Anzio, now telling its readers that "any outfit would have been proud of the record."

One of the 99<sup>th</sup>'s pilots, Lieutenant Lemuel Custis, who shot down a German FW 190 fighter over the Anzio beachhead and would later receive a Distinguished Flying Cross for it, was quoted in *The New York Times* as saying, "When the 99<sup>th</sup> first went over, the general impression was that it was an experiment. Now I think the record shows it was a successful experiment."

The 99<sup>th</sup> was the first squadron of several all-Black fighter and bomber squadrons formed during the Second World War. History refers to the pilots and crew of these units as the “Tuskegee Airmen.”

General Benjamin O. Davis, Sr. was made an assistant to the Army’s inspector general, tasked with resolving issues related to the training and deployment of the Army’s increasing numbers of segregated Black units. In 1944, he was assigned to the European Theater, where he advocated for Black units, recommending their increased deployment in combat. He retired from the Army in 1948. Benjamin O. Davis Sr. died in 1970 and was interred at Arlington National Cemetery, on land that once belonged to Robert E. Lee.

Benjamin Sr. is mostly remembered today as the father of his more famous son, but that isn’t entirely fair. His promotion to US Army general was a landmark moment in the history of civil rights in America. If his record seems sparse, it is because the Army resisted giving him significant authority or high-profile assignments because of his race, but he always used his position in the Army to advocate for Black soldiers.

Benjamin O. Davis Jr. continued to serve in the Army Air Forces and then in the US Air Force. He saw action in the Korean War and afterward was promoted to brigadier general, and served in the Twelfth Air Force in Germany. He retired from the Air Force in 1970, with the rank of lieutenant general. In 1998, he was promoted to general; President Bill Clinton personally pinned the fourth star onto his uniform. During his career, he was awarded the Silver Star, the Army Distinguished Service medal, the Air Force Distinguished Service medal, and the Distinguished Flying Cross, among others.

Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. died in 2002, at the age of 89. He was also interred at Arlington National Cemetery.

We’ll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I’d like to thank Roger and Paul for their kind donations, and thank you to Mac Dougan for becoming a patron of the podcast. Happy birthday, Mac. Donors and patrons like Richard and Leonard and Mac 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](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com) and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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The end of the year holidays are upon us again; this is the time of year when I always 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 look at the preparations for the invasion of France and look at the sometimes strained relationship between the British and the Americans on the one hand, and the French on the other. That's next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. If you will indulge me for a bit of reminiscence, my own father served in the Merchant Marine during the Second World War, and he spent much of that time stationed in the American South.

I described to you how Langston Hughes was shocked by the racism he experienced in the South and how African Americans from the northern United States were similarly shocked when they were recruited into the military and sent to the South. Not that the northern United States was any kind of post-racial utopia.

But it wasn't only Black people who were shocked by life in the segregated South. Northern white service members like my father were shocked, too. He spoke often of the mistreatment of African Americans he had observed, and I suspect many other white Northerners did too. Certainly that lieutenant from Wisconsin was among them. And I will add to that the reactions of white communities to Black soldiers stationed in their midst. There are anecdotes of local businesses such as restaurants and laundries that refused to serve Black American soldiers, even as they welcomed German POWs, and not only in the South.

If you want to know why the civil rights movement really went into high gear in the 1950s, the story begins right here.

[music: Closing War Theme]