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Black Africans in World War II: The Soldiers' Stories

By
JOHN H. MORROW JR.

This article discusses the often forgotten contributions of black African infantry to the French and British war efforts from Europe to Asia during the Second World War. It traces the relationship between black African soldiers and their imperial rulers as it evolved over the course of two global conflicts from 1914 to 1945. The article points out how racist preconceptions about the “inferior” abilities and intelligence of Africans paralleled white Americans’ prejudices against African-Americans and how the British and French attempted to systematically omit, diminish, or discredit the achievements of African soldiers.

Keywords: African infantry; *askaris*; King’s African Rifles; *Tirailleurs Sénégalais*; Second World War

Essays on the topic of Africa in the Second World War, such as those in *Africa since 1935*, the eighth volume (1993) of the UNESCO *General History of Africa* edited by Ali A. Mazrui, devote precious little space to the experience of the African soldiers who fought on the various battlefields of the costliest and most extensive conflict in human history. Yet the subject of infantry such as the famed *Tirailleurs Sénégalais* of French West Africa and the King’s African Rifles of British East Africa, who fought valiantly in both the First and the Second World Wars, merits sharper focus. These soldiers shed their blood for the right to equal treatment under their respective colonial regimes and, later, for the independence of their respective African nations from the colonial yoke.

Their struggle, in fact, paralleled that of the African-American soldiers who fought in both world wars to prove that black Americans merited the equality that white Americans denied

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them. Wartime service as combat soldiers and the willingness to fight and die for their country should have served as indisputable proof of their right to full and equal citizenship under the laws of the American republic. Instead, African-American claims met violent rejection, in the form of lynchings and race riots, at the hands of white Americans after World War I. After the Second World War, however, African-Americans, particularly soldiers, could tolerate discrimination no longer, and some white Americans recognized the injustice and waste in fielding segregated armed forces. President Harry Truman's desegregation of the armed forces in 1948, six years before the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education*, signaled the federal government's intent to provide legal equality for black citizens. The relationship between black African soldiers and their imperial rulers evolved similarly over the course of two global conflicts from 1914 to 1945.

The Great War of 1914–1918, the most global war of its time, forced European empires to conscript colonial soldiers to meet their rising demands for manpower. Some 192,000 Senegalese *Tirailleurs*, conscripted from sub-Saharan Africa, fought on the Western Front and in Togo, Cameroon, and Turkey. The French particularly valued their *troupes indigènes* as assault troops on the Western Front. Some 30,000 to 31,000 West African soldiers lost their lives in the war, while many others suffered wounds or returned disabled from their service on these fronts (Mann 2006, 16–17). Had the war lasted into 1920, the French planned to deploy a million African infantrymen in the invasion of Germany. In the victory parade in November 1919 in Paris, Senegalese infantry enjoyed a prominent place among the ranks of the victorious French army. On the other hand, the army was concerned that many Senegalese soldiers who spent time in French hospitals developed a “warped mentality” because “spoiled by the nurses, admired by the people . . . they expect to be treated like Europeans” (Mann 2006, 166). The army thus attempted to “reSenegalize” the men using an amalgam of created cultural rituals to prepare the soldiers for their imminent return to Africa.

The British, on the other hand, refused to use “aboriginal” (African) troops in Europe, and only in 1916 did the British Empire raise West African units and send them and West Indian soldiers to East Africa, where German Colonel (later General) Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck's vaunted African *askaris*, warriors or infantry, were besting British, white South African, and Indian soldiers in a prolonged guerrilla war. In the Second World War, the descendants of the *askaris*, now subjects of the British Empire, served in the British imperial forces as soldiers of the King's African Rifles side by side with their West African counterparts.

The French African *Tirailleurs*

After World War I, the French occupation forces in Germany included two regiments of West African soldiers, whom the French government had sent to the Rhineland in order to demobilize French soldiers and to “reward” the Africans for services rendered to the French nation during four years of war.

French government officials, such as Premier Georges Clemenceau and Blaise Diagne, the Senegalese deputy who had played the key role in recruiting Senegalese soldiers in return for benefits and more equal rights, also hoped to impress upon their African soldiers/subjects the power of a victorious France. Then they would return to “the various regions of our West African colonies; the turbulent populations impressed by the power of France [would] no longer be tempted to cause disturbances” (Fogarty 2008, 280).

Although the historical records show that the black African soldiers behaved well toward their German charges, the German government and propagandists portrayed them as “savages” guilty of every crime imaginable. The resulting hue and cry about “*Die Schwarze Schande*” or “*Smach*,” the “Black Shame” in the Rhineland, played upon the racist attitudes of British and American reporters, who took up the call of “the black horror on the Rhine” (see Scheck 2006, 98–101). The French removed the West African troops in June 1920.

In the process of repatriating the West African soldiers, the French government reneged on its wartime promises of January 1918 to grant the veterans pensions and the same rights as French citizens and naturalization if they so desired. “Republican tradition and history created a close link between service to the state in the military and the rights and duties of citizens,” observed historian Richard Fogarty, “but efforts to offer naturalization to soldiers, thus bringing their service into line with republican principles, foundered upon allegedly insurmountable racial and cultural difference” (Fogarty 2008, 273). As a consequence, West African veterans justifiably concluded that the governments in Paris and Dakar, Senegal, had mistreated and abandoned them by failing to enforce such wartime promises.

In a few cases, World War I veterans remained in the army and attained ranks as commissioned officers. Captain Charles N’Tchoréré, a native of Gabon, served in the last years of the war and rose to become commander of the academy for military cadets in St. Louis, Senegal, before retiring after 20 years of service. In the interwar years, the French army continued its conscription of West African recruits, and a total of some 250,000 served during the interwar years, with 48,000 in the ranks annually (Mann 2006, 85). The French army regularly posted them to garrisons in southern France.

When war broke out in Europe, from 1939 to June 1940, the French army summoned some 300,000 North African and 197,000 West African men to the colors. On the eve of the German invasion of France, an estimated 75,000 Senegalese infantry were in Métropole France. In May 1940, seven African divisions and three mixed colonial divisions in a French army of 80 divisions awaited the German onslaught. Some 63,300 West Africans saw combat in France in 1940 in eight colonial regiments (RTS—*Régiment de Tirailleurs Sénégalais*) and eight mixed regiments of colonial and metropolitan infantry (RICMS—*Régiment d’infanterie coloniale mixte sénégalais*). Among them Capt. Charles N’Tchoréré, who had reactivated his commission, commanded a company of the 53rd Regiment on the Somme not far from where his son, Corporal Jean-Baptiste, was deployed (Echenberg 1985, 368; Scheck 2006, 17).

The 1st and 6th Colonial Divisions on the Aisne River and in the Argonne bore the brunt of the German panzer invasion in May 1940, while the 4th and 5th Colonial Divisions bore the brunt of the German attacks on the Somme River after May 22. The African soldiers fought tenaciously and retreated in good order. However, many black Africans believed that French units “succumbed to demoralization and defeatism,” leaving them to cover the retreat of French soldiers and to suffer heavy casualties in their determined resistance to the Germans (Echenberg 1985, 368). In battles on the Somme in early June, the French resorted to “hedgehog” tactics, letting superior German units pass and then attacking them from the rear, while the Africans engaged the Germans in bitter close combat and house-to-house fighting. In response, Gen. Erwin Rommel’s 7th Panzer Division conducted “cleansing operations” against dispersed Senegalese and summarily executed captured soldiers (Scheck 2006, 24–26).

Gen. Hans Hube, commander of the German 16th Infantry Division, strenuously objected to France’s use of West African troops, which he deemed “a shame and dishonor, all the more so because our division has had to wage the hardest fights against the Negroes” (Scheck 2006, 69). German soldiers, stoked on Nazi propaganda that declared the West Africans to be illegitimate combatants, “bestial, savage, and perfidious,” and thoroughly shocked and enraged at the casualties they suffered against the Africans’ staunch resistance, massacred some 3,000 West African wounded soldiers and prisoners of war (POWs) in the western campaign (Scheck 2006, 9, 58).

Capt. N’Tchoréré’s *Tirailleurs* fought off several German attacks on June 5 and 6, 1940, at the village of Airaines. When the Germans finally captured the village and the African soldiers on June 7, a young Panzer officer insisted that the black captain line up with his enlisted men, not the captured French officers. When Capt. N’Tchoréré protested, the German shot him in the neck. His son, Jean-Baptiste, fell in combat the same day. Later, German soldiers massacred 50 of Capt. N’Tchoréré’s African soldiers and virtually annihilated the 53rd Regiment, which suffered nearly 90 percent casualties. At the armistice, some 10,000 West Africans had been killed, and half of the nearly 15,000 West African POWs would not survive German POW camps (Scheck 2006, 27–28). Historian Raffael Scheck discerns the elements of a “race war” in the campaign in the West and concludes that “the German Wehrmacht did conduct a race war against black Africans in the Western campaign of 1940” and that “they dealt with the black soldiers in a way that anticipated the horrors of the racialized warfare associated with the later German campaigns in the Balkans and the Soviet Union” (Scheck 2006, 3).

Two sons of Félix Eboué, the Guyanese governor of Chad who was the first high-ranking official in French Africa to side with de Gaulle’s Free French and who would later become governor-general of French Equatorial Africa, became POWs (Lawler 1992, 122). One POW, Léopold Sédar Senghor, was released on medical grounds in 1942 to resume his career as a teacher at a *lycée* in the Parisian suburb of Joinville. Born in Senegal in 1906, the son of a merchant who raised his son Catholic, Senghor was educated in French schools, completed his education at the Sorbonne, and became the first African to pass the *agrégation*—examinations

that entitled one to teach in a French *lycée*. He became a French citizen in 1934—an *évolué*—literally, one who had “evolved.” Senghor would further espouse the concept of Négritude and the ideology of Pan-Africanism, because the alienation he had experienced in France forced him and others similar to him to confront “their authentic selves.” After serving in the Resistance during the Second World War, he returned to Africa as part of a mass repatriation of *évolués* who had remained in France during the 1920s and 1930s (Scheck 2006, 49, 58; Echenberg 1985, 372; Genova 2004, 117, 137, 150, 168, 191, 205).

During the German occupation of France, the Vichy government repatriated most Senegalese soldiers to West Africa, where they became a forgotten generation. Vichy did send some 16,000 Senegalese infantrymen to North Africa and some 4,000 to the Middle East. When Allied units entered Syria and Lebanon in June 1941, Vichyite Senegalese fought Senegalese infantry serving in the Free French forces. After the Vichy defeat, most of the Vichyite *Tirailleurs* in the Levant joined the Free French rather than be repatriated to West Africa, and 1,500 of them became part of the famous Free French First Division. Free French generals expressed concerns about the reliability of their former enemies, as the Africans “[were] armed and trained to the teeth. Paternalism [was] no more. [They had] created gladiators with a powerful armament” (Lawler 1992, 152–53). Their concerns were baseless. The Senegalese soldiers suppressed a revolt in Syria in May 1942, while 1,000 had arrived in Egypt in December 1941 to fight in North Africa with the British Eighth Army against Rommel’s Afrika Korps. They fought at Bir Hakeim, where the French sacrificed themselves to delay Rommel’s attack, and later, when there were more than 2,000 infantry, at Alamein and across North Africa in the British advance in October and November 1942 (Lawler 1992, 154–57).

French West African soldiers participated in the invasions of Sicily and Italy and fought in the Italian theater of war. Twelve thousand of them liberated the island of Elba, the birthplace of Napoleon, in June 1944. Twenty thousand West African infantry participated in the invasion of southern France and fought in the campaign moving north through southern France, ultimately liberating the city of Belfort in eastern France in November 1944. Yet this was their last victory, because the West African soldiers in Gen. Jean de Lattre de Tassigny’s First French army were then summarily relieved of their uniforms and weapons without warning starting in September and October, grouped with the remaining African POWs liberated from German *Stalags*, and sent to the south of France for repatriation to West Africa (Echenberg 1985, 373–74).

These black African soldiers had fallen victim to the policy of *Blanchissement*. Gen. Charles de Gaulle had a politically expedient policy of “whitening” the French army by replacing them with French conscripts and partisans to exaggerate the importance of the French Resistance. De Gaulle sought to emphasize the French role in the liberation, to control the Resistance and particularly the communists in it, and to restore French self-confidence—at the expense and humiliation of Senegalese *Tirailleurs* who had fought loyally and valiantly for France for four years (Echenberg 1985, 375–76).

In London in January 1944, de Gaulle had insisted that his Frenchmen lead the liberation of Paris. In return, British and American generals, specifically British Gen. Frederick Morgan and Eisenhower's chief of staff, Maj. Gen. Walter Bedell Smith, informed de Gaulle that the division should "consist of white personnel." Smith further suggested that "the French 2nd Armored Division . . . with only one fourth native personnel, [was] the only French division operationally available that could be made one hundred percent white" (Thomson 2009).

All other French units, specifically infantry divisions, were only 40 percent white and 60 percent North and West African soldiers. The French 2nd Armored Division did lead the liberation of Paris in August 1944, but many of its personnel were Spanish refugees from Francisco Franco's authoritarian regime. To "whiten" the other French divisions, the French used soldiers from North Africa and the Middle East. From 1943 to 1945, 385,000 men from North Africa, including 290,000 Algerians, Tunisians, and Moroccans, fought in the liberation of Corsica, in the campaigns in Italy and southern France, and joined the main French army for the rest of the war.

After this humiliating summary dismissal, the West Africans languished in camps in the south of France until late November 1944 for lack of transport. After some 15 bloody clashes had occurred in France, the worst violence happened in Senegal in the Thiaroye transit camp outside Dakar on December 1, 1944. One thousand two hundred and eighty ex-POWs rioted because they had received no back pay or demobilization premiums; their guards opened fire on them, killing 35, seriously wounding another 30, and injuring hundreds more. This notorious incident, immortalized in fiction and film, left returning French West African veterans with a sense of a "shared experience" of struggle and the French government's ingratitude for their service. This sense of a collective group endured in West African veterans' associations, which played an important part in the struggle during the 1940s for pensions, benefits, and, ultimately, equality before the law (Echenberg 1985, 376–79).

Historian Martin Thomas concluded that in concentrating on metropolitan France, de Gaulle's provisional government made a "grave error in failing to highlight the pivotal contribution of colonial troops to the Free French military effort between 1940 and 1944" (Thomas 1998, 253). In contrast to the Africans' place of prominence in the French victory parade of 1919, the French government paid "limited official recognition of their achievements during the victory celebrations of 1945." The severity, in general, of the French treatment of their black African troops and, in particular, of the French response to the unrest among the *Tirailleurs*, "bore witness to the failure of French political memory regarding its colonial soldiers" and suggested that the "Gaullist emphasis upon France's debt to its empire was empty rhetoric." The French Empire "never entirely recovered from the rifts that had opened up between rulers and ruled" during the Second World War (Thomas 1998, 263).

Although West African veterans remained among the most consistent supporters of the French presence in Africa in order for the French government to fulfill its obligations to them, one group started the first independence movement in

West Africa after the war, the *Mouvement Nationaliste Africain* (Chafer 2002, 46–7). Senegalese war veterans particularly appreciated the candidacy of one of their own, Léopold Senghor, who wore khaki and sunglasses during his campaign in rural Senegal for election to the French Constituent Assembly in October 1945. Perhaps the most poignant symbol of France's failure to own up to the debt it owed the *Tirailleurs Sénégalais* was that after the war in Bamako, Mali, Ma Diarra, the widow of the heroic Capt. Charles N'Tchoréré, could not obtain the pension owed to her (Mann 2006, 128).

The British West African Frontier Force and King's African Rifles of East Africa

For British African forces, and for Africa in general and Ethiopia in particular, the Second World War started in 1935, when Italian Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini's European and colonial forces invaded and conquered Ethiopia with the intention of reversing the humiliating defeat that Italian forces had suffered at the hands of the Ethiopians at Adowa in 1896. The conquest proved an extremely brutal affair, as Mussolini's troops, emulating French, Italian, and Spanish colonial forces that had fought brutal wars to suppress rebellions in North Africa during the 1920s, employed the most highly toxic gases developed during the First World War against the Ethiopians. Although the Italian imperial forces conquered Ethiopia, they did not succeed in crushing internal opposition to their rule despite resorting to the most brutal methods, from massacres to deportation.

The Italian conquest galvanized resentment against European rule in Africa and Pan-Africanist sentiment among East and West African elites and future leaders such as Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria, Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, and I. T. A. Wallace-Johnson of Sierra Leone (Sbacchi 1985, 233–35). Mussolini, of course, paid no attention and was more intent, once his ally Adolf Hitler unleashed war on the European continent in 1939, on increasing still further his African empire. In 1940 he consequently unleashed attacks from his empire in the Horn of Africa against neighboring British colonies. The British responded by mobilizing white South African troops and black African soldiers from the West African Frontier Force and from the King's African Rifles in East Africa—the latter were the descendants of the *askaris* from the former German East African colonies—to thwart the Italians. In the East African campaign against Mussolini, the Nigerian Brigade staged a long and rapid advance into Ethiopia, only to be held outside the capital, Addis Ababa, to allow the white South African troops to enter the capital city first (Hamilton 2001, 340).

After the transfer of Ethiopia from Italy (a colony of) to Britain (a protectorate of), the soldiers of the West African Frontier Force formed the 81st and 82nd (West African) Divisions, and the soldiers of the King's African Rifles formed the 11th (East Africa) Division. At the suggestion of Sir George Giffard, inspector general of African forces, in December 1942, the three divisions were destined for service in the 14th Army of British Imperial Forces fighting against the Japanese

in Burma, in the China-Burma-India theater of war (Hamilton 2001, 35). The British continued to adhere to their policy from the war of 1914–1918 of deploying only African labor battalions and no “aboriginal” combat troops in Europe.

All four of Britain’s West African colonies—The Gambia, the Gold Coast, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone—provided units in the Frontier Force and consequently the West African divisions. British colonial authorities even recruited from tribes such as the Ashanti in the Gold Coast and the Yoruba in southwest Nigeria that they had normally avoided before the war, because they regarded the higher-educated indigenous peoples as potential troublemakers. Throughout the British Empire—and West and East Africa offered no exception—the British definition of “martial” tribesmen, their ideal recruits, coincided with the uneducated and less educated. The prewar Nigerian and Gold Coast Regiments used Hausa as their common language as they recruited primarily from uneducated tribes, but with the expansion of recruitment to include more educated tribes, the common language became pidgin English, a fortunate change as a number of the division’s new officers were Polish officers who had survived and fled the German invasion of their homeland. Hamilton also averred that in the absence of white settlers in West Africa, an attempt to send white Rhodesians as officers failed, as their attitudes toward “bloody Kaffirs” were “not helpful” (Hamilton 2001, 26, 32–33).

Some 23,000 West African “volunteers,” actually conscripts, 3,000 of whom were infantry, sailed in troopships around the Horn of Africa and into the Indian Ocean, destined for service in some of the most forbidding climates and terrain in any theater of the conflict. They formed the 81st Division for first-line combat, which included 28 battalions unique for their dependence on carriers or porters. The 81st was the largest concentration of African troops ever assembled, much larger than any unit that the British mobilized between 1914 and 1918, and it included artillery and antiaircraft units and a medical corps. Its reliance on human transport, so reminiscent of the First World War, appeared at first glance an anachronism ill suited for a war of machines that relied on automotive or aerial transport. Ironically, these very porters or carriers prepared the West Africans to fight in the northwest extremity of Burma, the north Arakan. Brigadier Swynnerton of the 1st (West African) Brigade observed that his men were the only soldiers in Burma who were “capable of operating for months on end in the worst country in the world, without vehicles and without mules, and [were] alone able to carry all [their] warlike stores with [them]” (Hamilton 2001, 28). The infantrymen wore standard jungle green British fatigues; carried the standard Enfield rifle with bayonet, “Mills bombs,” rifle grenades, and a Bren or light machine gun for each infantry section; and were supported by light artillery. Japanese infantry had heavier weapons, medium machine guns, and even 37-millimeter, high-velocity antitank cannons for use against infantry. The African carriers, in practice designated “unarmed soldiers,” wore the same equipment as infantry and were actually trained to use infantry weapons. They cleared drop zones, collected supplies dropped from the air, and cleared airstrips for the evacuation of wounded soldiers. But they could also defend themselves, and as the campaign continued, 40 percent of the carriers were armed with the lightweight automatic Sten gun and a few Bren guns.

The Arakan's narrow jungle valleys, cut by *chaungs* (streams or rivers) and ending in mangrove swamps, were bounded on both sides by steep hills covered thickly with bamboo stalks 18 feet high and topped by narrow ridges. From these steep hills rose high mountains. The valleys, ridges, and mountains were negotiable only by narrow paths impassable to animal and motor transport. The southwest monsoon regularly drenched the region with as much as 200 inches of rain between May and November. The days were hot and the nights cold and damp; diseases such as scrub typhus, malaria, and cholera abounded.

In January 1944, the men of the 81st Division headed into the dense jungle and hills on the northern flank of the imperial army to drive the Japanese southeast out of Burma. Imbued with an offensive attitude, the West Africans moved at a rate of some eight miles per day through the bush. The Africans remained in the jungle for six months, receiving supplies by air for five of them—some three months longer than Orde Wingate's famed Chindits survived behind Japanese lines. The Africans covered more ground than any Chindit column, as they moved rapidly over mountainous jungle where no roads or pack animals could penetrate (Hamilton 2001, 159).

The voices of the West and East African soldiers are not available, but British authors who served as junior officers with them during the campaign have rescued their soldiers from obscurity within the past decade. John A. L. Hamilton, a company intelligence officer in the 81st, was particularly galled by 14th Army commander Gen. William Slim's statement that the African soldiers would be "lost" if left on their own without British junior officers. Hamilton consequently liberally sprinkled his narrative with accounts of derring-do on the part of African noncommissioned officers and enlisted men and platoons led by African noncoms that demonstrated their bravery, initiative, and sound tactical sense. In the process, the African soldiers were awarded the Military Medal and the Distinguished Conduct Medal for heroism and gallantry, but the British Empire's highest medal, the Victoria Cross, was denied to Africans.

In an encounter where the Japanese forces suffered severe casualties in overrunning an Indian artillery unit attached to the African soldiers, the Sikh officer in command of the guns received the Victoria Cross. British officers penned a doggerel that went in part, "The next day Corps replied, a VC you must pick,/Say a dead Gurkha or part-damaged Sikh/For the Africans, voteless, are not worth a damn—/You might just as well decorate Kaladan Sam [a nickname for the Japanese soldier]" (Hamilton 2001, 227).

That Africans were deliberately denied the Victoria Cross is analogous to the African-American experience in the First and Second World Wars, as the U.S. Army refused to award the Congressional Medal of Honor to any African-American soldier. Only during the Clinton administration did the Army award a limited number long after the events and after a number of the former soldiers had died of natural causes.

As Hamilton's account above makes eminently clear, the African soldiers proved to be highly capable troops in the difficult conditions of Burma. Hamilton was particularly impressed with the African NCOs (noncommissioned officers),

whose illiteracy necessitated that they literally memorize the weapon training manual and who “managed well without a white man to guide” them (Hamilton 2001, 115). He cited engagements in which “Africans controlled their fire admirably and coolly, relying mainly on grenades, their favourite weapon, which was the preferred close-quarters weapon in jungle war, not the bayonet” (Hamilton 2001, 149).

This last observation about preference for the grenade stands in sharp contrast to French African soldiers, whose white commanders in both world wars often not only preferred but ordered them to use their long knives, or *coupe-coupes*, whenever possible, to strike fear into the hearts of their German enemy as they rushed forward to engage in fighting at close quarters. The African soldiers expressed their preference for pistols, because the Germans took advantage of their lack of firearms to shoot them in the back in hand-to-hand combat. The Senegalese infantry would have much preferred to kill the Germans straight out rather than merely strike fear in their hearts. In the campaign of 1940, German troops occasionally massacred captured African troops using the Africans’ long knives as retribution for their possession.

In contrast, the West Africans attacked with the Bren gun and grenades, charging straight up near-vertical ascents and 60 yards across open ground to attack Japanese bunkers, or executing wide-ranging flanking movements to strike the Japanese. They also attacked with fixed bayonets when necessary. These soldiers excelled not only in attack, but also in retreat. In prolonged encounters with Japanese, who outnumbered them, individual soldiers effectively covered their retreating patrols with enfilades, even when wounded. Nigerian Sergeant Dogo Yerwa, despite wounds from grenade splinters, led his platoon effectively, moving from section to section to ensure their selection of enemy targets, accuracy of fire, and conservation of ammunition, as the Africans repulsed a seven-hour attack by a company of Japanese soldiers (Hamilton 2001, 225).

The war in Burma was a struggle between smaller units of company, through platoon, down to squad—a subaltern (junior commissioned officer) and sergeant’s war. The loss of commissioned officers meant that African sergeants and sergeant-majors led platoons and patrols. The 81st Division’s officers included Lieutenant Seth Anthony, trained in England and the first African to hold the King’s commission (Hamilton 2001, 46). All African units suffered substantial and irreplaceable losses among their European officers, but they continued to function because their African NCOs stepped up to the mark and led the men effectively. The 81st Division consequently advanced and captured Myohaung, the ancient capital of Arakan, so quickly that they enabled the main British imperial force to capture its objective of Akyab Island without fighting, because the Japanese had withdrawn for fear of being outflanked. Hamilton observed that the division’s unique mobility in the jungle, which the men regarded as a friend that cloaked their movements to outmaneuver the Japanese, would have actually enabled the West Africans to advance even farther and faster had the army not restrained them to conform with advances on the main front. The army congratulated its commandos for their capture of Akyab but was silent about the Africans’ capture of Myohaung (Hamilton 2001, 83, 243, 260).

The West Africans received very little notice from the 14th Army. The public relations officer (PRO) of the West African Expeditionary Force observed cynically that they “went in anonymously, marched out anonymously, and it seems they have left anonymous dead behind them. . . . [T]hey have remained anonymous . . . in all the written records of the Far East War.” The PRO went on to write, “This campaign was the only one which no war correspondent covered.” The 14th Army’s commanders seldom visited the 81st Division, resulting in the division’s being “out of sight and out of mind.” Hamilton acerbically commented, “It seems that no one had noticed 20,000 men . . . operating in enemy territory all that time; perhaps black faces did not show up in the jungle” (Hamilton 2001, 21–22, 159, 163, 342). This unfortunate circumstance led to the failure of British historians of the war to give the 81st Division the credit that it merited and to ignore, or even to denigrate, the service of the African soldiers.

At least the West Africans did receive some accolades from their commanders, as the men’s endurance, strength, stamina, and intelligence came to the attention of Division Commander Maj. Gen. Loftus Tottenham, a former commander of Gurkhas (Hamilton 2001, 197). Gen. Brian Leese’s official dispatch also recognized their achievements. With no means of transport via land, limited communication or physical contact with the outside world, and slender resources, the 81st (West African) Division had beaten back parts of the Japanese 54th and 55th Divisions and cleared the greater part of the Kaladan Valley. “For the first time, divisions from East and West Africa [the 11th, 81st, and 82nd] were fighting as complete formations with the British Commonwealth Forces, and they had shown outstanding ability to endure terrible conditions of terrain and climate” (Hamilton 2001, 258). Perhaps most significant, the debriefing of Japanese commanders revealed that they considered both West and East African soldiers “the best jungle fighters” of the Allies for their ability to penetrate the flanks of Japanese positions and for rescuing their dead and wounded after an action (Nunneley 1998, 5; Hamilton 2001, 9).

When the army sent the 81st Division to the rear at the end of its deployment in Burma, it sent the soldiers to the heat of the Madras plains in India some hundred miles upcountry from the city of Madras. After nearly 18 months away from civilization, the disappointed soldiers languished in isolation from mid-March until December 1945, when they shipped out for home. The 81st Division returned to West Africa in December 1945 to be demobilized by March 1946, although a detachment did march in the Victory Parade in London in June 1946. In colonies such as the Gold Coast, part of the future state of Ghana, and Nigeria, returning soldiers could channel their aspirations through the political parties that were demanding self-government, and in 1948, veterans played a key role in Kwame Nkrumah’s rise to power in Ghana.

In the King’s African Rifles from East Africa, John Nunneley served as a British officer in the 6th Battalion (Tanganyika Territory), as British officers and senior NCOs were “seconded” or attached to African regiments for the duration of the conflict. “Colonial” officers, East African white planters, returned to their farms in a general imperial attempt to increase food production, and were replaced by “imperials” such as Nunneley who were sent out from Britain. His company’s

askaris came mostly from the Tanganyikan tribes such as the Nyamwezi, Wagogo, Chagga, Sukuma, a few Hehe, and a strong contingent of Yao from the south, but a few came from as far away as Sudan and the West Nile, and one all the way from the Gold Coast. According to Nunneley, few soldiers in the East African forces were Christian or Muslim; rather, most of them were pagans who celebrated in dance and feast to the beat of the *ngoma*, the drum (Nunneley 1998, 32–33, 62).

Nunneley cited the material benefits of military service, such as regular meals, as an attraction for men from impoverished areas, but he emphasized the “intangible but immense lifelong prestige” of being an *askari* of the King’s African Rifles as the major lure. The African soldiers’ fitness, strength, and “astonishing” endurance enabled them to apply the “intensely physical” new battle drill of infantry tactics, displaying coordinated and disciplined actions at the sound of the officer’s whistle. They quickly mastered running, crawling, surmounting obstacles, attacking and charging with the bayonet, and deploying to form pincer movements in an attack (Nunneley 1998, 35–36).

The army’s wartime need for specialists in signals and other trades prompted the recruitment of the Kikuyu for the first time because of their superior knowledge compared with the “martial” tribes such as the Kalenji and the Kamba, although the British deemed the Kikuyu “notorious troublemakers.” This amalgam of various tribes, led by British officers such as Nunneley, sailed first for Ceylon. Nunneley had passed written and oral examinations in Swahili, which enabled him to communicate with his *askaris* and censor the mail that professional letter writers had drafted on behalf of soldiers or their families at home. In transit from Mombasa, Kenya, to Colombo, Ceylon, in early 1944, the transport *Khedive Ismail* fell victim to Japanese torpedoes in the Indian Ocean and there was heavy loss of life. Of the 1,511 passengers on board, 30 of 199 British officers and 113 of 787 *askaris* survived (Nunneley 1998, 84, 107, 117).

The East Africans, similar to their West African counterparts, proved superb soldiers, calm and confident, in Nunneley’s judgment. Although most East African soldiers came from open spaces such as plains, hills, or desert, Nunneley concluded that their acute powers of observation made them especially good trackers and patrol leaders in jungle warfare. Under pressure from the 14th Army command, they advanced at high speed down the Kaladan Valley. In Nunneley’s opinion, the pace resulted in insufficient reconnaissance and avoidable casualties, but the soldiers’ morale remained high despite their casualties (Nunneley 1998, 151, 156, 167).

During their deployment to Ceylon and then Burma, Nunneley noted three incidents in which African NCOs and enlisted men of his company struck back after punishment for infractions of regulations. The King’s African Rifles resorted to lashes with the *kiboko*, or rhino-hide whip, for major infractions. Cowardice in the face of the enemy merited the death penalty. Nunneley does not cite the punishment for the initial crimes committed by the African soldiers, but in retribution for them a sergeant shot and killed three officers before he was gunned down, and two enlisted men faced the firing squad, the first for shooting and killing an officer and the second for killing one officer and wounding five others

with a grenade (Nunneley 1998, 65–67, 108, 172). If the initial punishment entailed 12 lashes—a standard number—in front of the unit, these soldiers may have resented this humiliation, which smacked of slavery, so greatly that they felt obliged to kill the officers who were responsible, even if it meant their certain death. Furthermore, these African soldiers clearly feared neither their white officers nor death, potentially an ominous portent for postwar relationships in British East Africa.

After the Second World War, two of the African NCOs in Nunneley's battalion rose to command, first in the ranks of the Mau Mau rebels in the late 1940s and early 1950s and later in Jomo Kenyatta's Kenyan army. Waruhiu Itote, one of a few Kikuyus in the battalion, became "General China" in the Mau Mau military command structure, and later Kenyatta appointed him second in command of the National Youth Service. Juma Ndolo, a Kamba, attended Officers Training Command in England after the war and ultimately rose to command the Kenyan army with the rank of major general before his retirement in the early 1970s (Nunneley 1998, 67–68).

Conclusion

The service of black African infantry in the ranks of French and British imperial forces has not received the attention it merits from historians, because contemporary European observers usually either ignored or denigrated their service. Racist preconceptions about the "inferior" abilities and intelligence of Africans paralleled white Americans' prejudices against African-Americans. These American combat soldiers disappeared from the history of the war, to receive only negative mention when white historians denigrated the achievements of black soldiers, whether African or American, as a race; although these historians never attributed to their race the similar performance on the part of European or white American soldiers.

Fortunately, in recent years, a few European officers who fought in African units have begun to rescue their comrades and units from obscurity. Correspondingly, a few young and talented scholarly historians such as Gregory Mann and Richard Fogarty have joined such predecessors as Myron Echenberg and Nancy Ellen Lawler to research the archives and to interview survivors to shed valuable light on the experiences and achievements of French black African soldiers in both world wars. Similar scholarly historical work remains to be done on British black African soldiers.

In the absence of much concrete research, historical debate has swirled around the number of veterans participating in postwar politics and independence movements. Yet the number is less important than the essential point that many of them did, and very effectively, and all desired to have perceived wrongs righted and to enjoy the legitimate benefits for their services. They had paid, in French terminology, the *impôt du sang*, or blood tax, and if not independence, they certainly sought equality. The British and French attempts to omit, diminish, or discredit the achievements of African soldiers stemmed from their intent to ignore or limit

African demands for equality and independence, in the same fashion that white Americans' refusal to acknowledge the combat service of African-American soldiers was intended to keep the latter "in their place" and forestall the granting of equal rights to black citizens under the law.

African combat soldiers of World War II, similar to their African-American counterparts, consequently became forgotten soldiers. In particular, soldiers from British East and West Africa fought in the 14th Army in the Burmese campaign in the China-Burma-India theater, often referred to by historians as the "Forgotten Army" in the "Forgotten War." The African soldiers epitomize the "forgotten soldiers" of that "forgotten" struggle, just as their French African and African-American counterparts became the "forgotten" soldiers of their armies. Historians are now in the process of rescuing these men from obscurity so that history might reflect their very real contributions to the allied war effort in the Second World War, the most momentous conflict in history.

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