WHEN BLACK NURSES WERE RELEGATED TO CARE FOR GERMANPRISONERS OF WAR

BEFORE PRESIDENT TRUMAN DESEGREGATED THE U.S. MILITARY ON JULY 26, 1948, BLACK NURSES HAD FEWER AND – LESS DESIRABLE - OPPORTUNITIES IN THE U.S. ARMY NURSE CORPS

466

U.S. Lt. Florie E. Grant tending to a German POW at a German POW Hospital in 1944

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On July 26, 1948, President Truman signed an executive order that desegregated the U.S. Armed Forces. The act was long overdue, particularly for African American nurses*, who had just served in World War II.*

Though the United States had been at war against Hitler's racist regime, Jim Crow segregation permeated *American culture and the entire military—including the U.S. Army Nurse Corps*. Black nurses who served in the war found themselves in one of two places— *segregated bases with Black soldiers or German prisoner of war camps*

At the segregated bases, Black nurses served in all-Black units, lived in "colored" barracks, worked in "colored" hospitals, ate in separate dining areas and socialized in segregated spaces on base. Along with the separate facilities, Black nurses endured racist treatment from local white residents in town, fellow white army officers, *and even from German prisoners of war.*

During World War II, there were 371,683 German POWs who were captured in Europe and Northern Africa, then shipped to the United States and detained in more than 600 camps across the country.

Prisoners of war, under rules set by the Geneva Convention, could be made to work for the detaining power. And, with millions of American men away serving in the military, there was a significant labor shortage in the United States. Farms, canneries, plants and other industries needed German POWs as workers, *and Black army nurses were overwhelmingly assigned to POW camps.*

To them, the assignment could be deeply troubling. Black nurses volunteered to serve wounded American soldiers, not the enemy. It had taken decades for Black nurses to be admitted into the U.S. Army Nurse Corps, and to be given the task of caring for soldiers in Hitler's army felt like a betrayal.

The interactions between the POWs and Black nurses were largely civilized, but there were reported incidences where *Nazi beliefs of racial superiority were on full display*.

For example, at Camp Papago Park, outside of Phoenix, a German POW declared he hated Black people in front of a Black nurse.

When the commanding officer of the camp didn't issue any punishment, the nurse filed a complaint, dated August 1, 1944, to the National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses: "That is the worst insult an army officer should ever have to take. I think it is insult enough to be here taking care of them when we volunteered to come into the army to nurse military personnel...All of this is making us very bitter."

Long before World War II, Black nurses had been struggling to serve their country. When the United States entered *World War I* in 1917, *Black nurses tried to enroll in the Army Nurse Corps but were rejected because of their skin color*. A few Black nurses eventually served, but not because the Army Nurse Corps finally accepted them. The *flu epidemic* wiped out so many thousands of people that a handful of African American nurses were called to assist.

Decades later, after Hitler invaded Poland, the U.S. began an intense war preparedness program, and the Army Nurse Corps expanded its recruiting process. Thousands of Black nurses who wanted to serve their country and earn a steady military income filled out applications and received the following letter:

"Your application to the Army Nurse Corps cannot be given favorable consideration as there are no provisions in Army regulations for the appointment of colored nurses in the Corps."

However painful, the rejection notice was an honest assessment of how Black nurses were regarded. The military didn't see them as fit to wear an army nurse uniform, despite their comparable education and training to white nurses.

The National Association of Colored Graduate Nurses, (NACGN), — an advocacy organization founded in 1908 for Black registered nurses, challenged the letter. And with political pressure from civil rights groups and the Black press, *56 Black nurses were finally admitted into the U.S. Army Nurse Corps in 1941—all sent to segregated bases in the South.*

U.S. Army nurses during a lecture at the Army Nurse Training Center in England, 1944.*(Credit: The National Archives)*

As the war progressed, the numbers of Black nurses allowed to enlist remained surprisingly low. By 1944, only 300 Black women served in the entire Army Nurse Corps, compared to 40,000 white nurses*. Many were relegated to German prisoner of war camps.*

Serving at POW camps was considered a second-rate assignment and the camps were isolating and lonely for Black nurses. They were routinely left out of meetings with white officers and weren't invited to their social functions.

There wasn't much job fulfillment at POW hospitals either. Most prisoners were in good health, which had been a requirement to make the transatlantic journey to America, so Black nurses weren't utilized to full capacity. They had typical bedside nursing duties but rarely were there critical cases.

For German POWs, at least from a social standpoint, they fared better than Black nurses. White civilians and military personnel were friendly towards them—a level of respect that Black nurses did not experience with any regularity.
When German prisoners first arrived in the U.S., many were surprised by the segregation and racism in America. In one train depot in Texas, a group of Black soldiers were denied access to the Whites-Only dining hall, yet saw through a window, a group of German POWs and their American guards sitting at a table together, laughing and eating.

German POWs in Camp Florence, circa 1944-1946.

Thousands of white nurses also had POW camp assignments—they had to—there were so few Black women in the Army Nurse Corps. But if a Black unit could replace a white one at a camp, the swap was made. *Even internationally, a unit of African American nurses was sent to England to care for German POWs, not American soldiers.*

As the war entered its final year, the number of American wounded men had skyrocketed. There was even a threat of a nursing draft, with no acknowledgement of the 9,000 Black nurses who had applied to the Army Nurse Corps—and been passed over.
Congressman Adam Clayton Powell Jr., the charismatic minister from Harlem, famously denounced the draft legislation, saying to the House of Representatives on March 7, 1945: *"It is absolutely unbelievable that in times like these, when the world is going forward, that there are leaders in our American life who are going backward. It is further unbelievable that these leaders have become so blindly and unreasonably un-American that they have forced our*

wounded men to face the tragedy of death rather than allow trained nurses to aid because these nurses' skins happen to be of a different color."

The nursing draft never happened and by war's end, only 500 Black nurses served out of 59,000, a mere 0.8 percent of the U.S. Army Nurse Corps. Now 70 years later, since the military was desegregated, African American nurses make up 17 percent of the Army Nurse Corps, *and the current Surgeon General of the U.S. Army, the highest ranking medical officer, is Lt. General Nadja West, the first Black woman to hold that position.*