

African Americans in the Spanish Civil War After Spain

African American veterans returned from Spain arm in arm with their white comrades. Photographs of the time show men who had fought together in battle standing together again aboard the ships that brought them home.

As the Lincolns disembarked in New York, well-wishers greeted them with kisses, hugs and shouts. But they landed in a homeland that did not honor their courage against fascism and racism. FBI agents who [James Yates](#) thought "would have been more comfortable with the fascists we had been fighting in Spain," detained the veterans and took their passports. Then New York City reality set in. After registering Yates' white comrades, a clerk at the Grand Hotel on Broadway told him "No vacancy." "The pain went as deeply as a bullet could have done. I had the dizzy feeling I was back in the trenches again. But this was another front. I was home." Yates and his comrades left for a more hospitable hotel.

Though Black veterans had returned to what Yates called "another kind of warfare," like the others, he said, "I had grown tougher." During World War II Yates served in a segregated U.S. Army Signal Corp unit, but because of his service in Spain, he was pulled out when his unit was shipped overseas. Veterans such as Crawford Morgan and Joe Taylor battled Jim Crow rules in the Army that assigned African Americans to what Taylor called "nasty jobs."

During the war Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. proposed that at least one U.S. Army unit be modeled on the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. But this did not come to pass and for Black veterans of Spain a segregated army meant new battles. In 1942 sailor [Luchelle McDaniels](#) in Durban, South Africa, led fellow sailors in a sit-down protest at Woolworth's segregated lunch counter, then integrated a movie theater, and finally led a sailors' march through Durban streets demanding treatment as "human beings." He returned to carry his anti-racist message to white audiences in his home state of Mississippi.

During World War II [Walter Garland](#) lectured to white officers about the battle of Brunete and also helped invent an improved machine-gun site. But when a white MP used the phrase "black bastard" Garland fought back and was arrested. As chief instructor of a segregated quartermaster unit Vaughn Love introduced political lectures designed to stir the pride of Black soldiers, but when his unit went overseas he faced continued racist treatment that led to violent confrontations with white soldiers.

[Salania Kea](#) enlisted in the U.S. Army Nurse Corps and this time her experience was highly valued by superiors. Jerry Weinberg, who had tried to rescue [Oliver Law](#) at Brunete, won a Distinguished Flying Cross for bombing raids over enemy Romania, was once shot down but escaped from a Turkish prison to Egypt and died over Germany.

In 1945 Sergeant [Edward Carter, Jr.](#) was decorated for his extraordinary courage when he single-handedly fought off a German squad and returned with two prisoners despite eight shrapnel and bullet wounds. But Carter's outspoken views on the mistreatment of African American soldiers in the U.S. army and his appearance at a rally sponsored by a group that had attracted the attention of the FBI, sealed his future. In 1949 he was denied the right to re-enlist in the Army, not given an explanation or a hearing, and placed under Army surveillance until his death in 1963. His service in the Lincoln Brigade was among the principal reasons his status changed from decorated hero to pariah.

Carter and his family never ceased their campaign to clear his name. In 1997 President Bill Clinton posthumously awarded Carter the Congressional Medal of Honor for his heroism in Germany half a century before. Two years later President Clinton publicly apologized to his family for the way Army Intelligence scapegoated a patriot and national hero.

After Spain many Lincoln veterans, white and black, returned to fight for human rights in the United States. Many became supporters of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. or the Black Power movement. Luchelle McDaniels led a protest march in Sacramento, California, to demand sidewalks in Black neighborhoods.

James Yates and other Lincoln veterans also faced persecution during the McCarthy era. Yates reported, "I was harassed by the FBI and rejected for every job for which I applied." He finally had to set up his own TV repair shop. The FBI accumulated extensive files on many veterans including Walter Garland. [Crawford Morgan](#) and others were questioned by Congressional committees about their service in Spain and their struggle against segregation and discrimination. Finally, Ramon Durem used poetry to express his dissent from Cold War culture.

From 1964 to 1968 Yates served as president of the Greenwich Village-Chelsea chapter of the NAACP that sent tons of food and clothing to civil rights activists in his birth state of Mississippi. White veterans pitched in as well. In Pittsburgh in 1949 Steve Nelson lived in a Black neighborhood and with his wife and two children took part in marches that successfully desegregated a swimming pool. In 1964 Abe Osheroff worked with African Americans to rebuild a Community Center in Mississippi. His car was dynamited and he had to carry a .38 pistol and a shotgun. "I had gone abroad, so to speak, to fight in a foreign war," he said. In 1966 Lincoln nurse Ruth Davidow volunteered to teach medical care procedures for African Americans in Mississippi. Three years later she served the medical needs of Native Americans who occupied Alcatraz, and often was the only white person the occupiers allowed on the island.

[Vaughn Love](#) saw the "fighters for South African freedom" as part of his "battle against racism and fascism." The

Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade became one of the first organizations to send medical aid to the African National Congress, to demand Nelson Mandela's release from prison, and to support a South Africa free of racial oppression.

African Americans who fought against fascism in Spain and in World War II did not automatically embrace the civil rights leadership's policy of nonviolence. Their experience led them to think that entrenched bigotry would not bow to nonviolence preached by religious leaders. Vaughn Love stayed away from nonviolent protests "because I would probably have gotten into trouble . . . I would not have turned the other cheek."

The rise of the "Black Power" movement attracted Black veterans such as [Harry Haywood](#) who saw it vindicating his earlier revolutionary writing. He talked about the African American masses "taking political power into their own hands." But more agreed with Vaughn Love who said, "You must try to get into the mainstream of America, for this is where we belong. Where is the black power when you don't have a job" He urged others to "work within the system and with people who are going in your direction."

The African Americans of the Lincoln Brigade never ceased their fight against fascism. They carried it into World War II and then into the long struggle for human rights back home and in the world.