

Introduction

III. RACE AND WORLD WAR I

THE UNITED STATES in April of 1917 was a nation divided by race. Calls for unconditional loyalty and “One Hundred Percent Americanism” by the federal government and civilian groups alike stemmed from deep anxieties about the racial composition of the country’s population. The imperatives of forging a unified war mobilization effort clashed with deeply ingrained ideas about race that informed how Americans viewed both the German enemy and each other. At home and abroad, Americans fought a war within the war that had race as its defining characteristic.

African Americans experienced this tension more profoundly than any other group. Wartime economic opportunities sparked the Great Migration of thousands of black southerners to the urban North. However, as racial oppression remained unrelenting, African Americans approached America’s entry into the war and Woodrow Wilson’s call to make the world “safe for democracy” with understandable skepticism. Black Socialists like A. Philip Randolph openly opposed the war, while large numbers of African Americans, especially in the South, found ways to avoid the draft. However, the vast majority of black people, encouraged by the black press and leaders such as W. E. B. Du Bois, came to support the war effort and were determined to do their part, as both soldiers and civilians, to aid their country in its time of need.

Racial violence and institutionalized discrimination tested black people’s patriotic resolve. On July 2, 1917, a racial pogrom erupted in East St. Louis, Illinois, that left entire neighborhoods in ashes and at least thirty-nine—and possibly three times as many—African Americans dead. The following month, on the night of August 23, a contingent of black soldiers of the 24th Infantry, frustrated and angered by weeks of racist abuse and fearing attack by a lynch mob, shot and killed sixteen white residents and police officers in Houston, Texas. As it worked to raise an army virtually from scratch, the United

States government remained committed to preserving the color-line. "There is no intention on the part of the War Department to undertake at this time to settle the so-called race question," Secretary of War Newton Baker declared in a November 30, 1917, memo. Official Jim Crow policies, from the administration of the draft to the final demobilization process, shaped the experience of African American servicemen through the entire course of America's participation in the war.

In spite of tremendous obstacles, African Americans made an important contribution to the Allied victory. Some 380,000 black men ultimately served in the United States army, with over 200,000 sent to France. Although the army relegated the vast majority of African American troops to labor duties, two black divisions did see action on the Western Front. The 92nd Division, composed of draftees and black junior officers and sergeants like Charles Isum, suffered from systemic racism and poor leadership from its white commanders, many of whom despised the very idea of black men serving in combat. By contrast, the 93rd Division, made up largely of black National Guard regiments and assigned to the French army, established a distinguished fighting record, highlighted by the exploits of the 369th Infantry Regiment, which became known as the "Harlem Hellfighters."

Based on their sacrifice and loyalty, African Americans greeted the end of the war with hope that the country would reward them with greater democratic rights and opportunity. Instead, race relations across the country worsened. Racial violence erupted throughout the nation in 1919, demonstrating that the end of the war had brought anything but peace, or democracy. Race riots broke out in several cities, most notably Washington, D.C., and Chicago. Fearing an uprising by black sharecroppers, whites in Phillips County, Arkansas, aided by U.S. troops, massacred more than one hundred, and possibly more than two hundred, African Americans. The number of lynchings leapt to eighty-three, including at least eleven returned black servicemen.

Many African Americans, both emboldened and disillusioned by their war experience and its aftermath, determined to fight even harder for their civil and human rights. The war created a "New Negro," characterized by a spirit of resistance

that W. E. B. Du Bois powerfully captured in his *Crisis* editorial “Returning Soldiers.” In the ensuing postwar years, African Americans would take the lessons learned from their war experiences and apply them to renewed struggle against racism and white supremacy.

Chad Williams
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“THE CRISIS OF THE WORLD”:
NEW YORK, JULY 1918

W.E.B. Du Bois: “Close Ranks”

The first African American to receive a Ph.D. from Harvard University, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois was the most prominent black intellectual in America. Teacher, sociologist, historian, writer, and political activist, he was a founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the editor of its monthly magazine, *The Crisis*. Since the spring of 1917, Du Bois had pronounced support for the war while continuing to denounce racial discrimination and violence. In June 1918 he met with his friend Joel Spingarn, a wealthy literary critic, educator, and the chairman of the NAACP board. Spingarn, then serving as a major in military intelligence, offered Du Bois a commission as an army captain and an assignment to a special intelligence bureau investigating racial problems. While considering the offer, Du Bois wrote this editorial, invoking black Americans to “forget our special grievances” for the duration of the war. His change of position and willingness to serve in the army drew intense criticism within the NAACP, and the offer of a military commission was withdrawn in late July.

THIS IS the crisis of the world. For all the long years to come men will point to the year 1918 as the great Day of Decision, the day when the world decided whether it would submit to military despotism and an endless armed peace—if peace it could be called—or whether they would put down the menace of German militarism and inaugurate the United States of the World.

We of the colored race have no ordinary interest in the outcome. That which the German power represents today spells death to the aspirations of Negroes and all darker races for equality, freedom and democracy. Let us not hesitate. Let us, while this war lasts, forget our special grievances and close our ranks shoulder to shoulder with our own white fellow citizens and the allied nations that are fighting for democracy. We make no ordinary sacrifice, but we make it gladly and willingly with our eyes lifted to the hills.

The Crisis, July 1918

CONFRONTING INJUSTICE:
LOS ANGELES, MAY 1919

Charles R. Isum to W.E.B. Du Bois

A bookbinder from Los Angeles, Sergeant Charles Isum served with the medical detachment of the 365th Infantry Regiment, 92nd Division, in the Meuse-Argonne and in the Marbache Sector, where he treated wounded and gassed men under artillery fire during the final days of the war. Isum himself was gassed the day before the Armistice but remained in the field. In his letter to Du Bois he related his experiences with the army anti-fraternization policies described in the May number of *The Crisis*. In 1922 Charles and Zellee Isum had a daughter, Rachel, who later became a nurse; in 1946 she would marry the baseball player Jackie Robinson.

1343 Lawrence Street,
Los Angeles, California,
May 17, 1919.

Hon. W.E.B. DuBois,
Editor of *The Crisis*,
70 Fifth Avenue, N.Y.

Dear Sir:

I have just finished reading the May issue of *The Crisis* and have enjoyed it immensely. I am indeed pleased to note that someone has the nerve and backbone to tell the public the unvarnished facts concerning the injustice, discrimination and southern prejudices practiced by the white Americans against the black Americans in France.

I am a recently discharged Sergeant of the Medical Detachment, 365th. Infantry, 92nd. Division, and I take this opportunity to relate one of my personal experiences with the southern rednecks who were in command of my division, brigade and regiment.

On or about December 26, 1918 General Order No. 40 was issued from the headquarters of the 92nd. Division. I cannot recall the exact wording of the part of the order which was of

a discriminating nature, but it read something to this effect, "Military Police will see that soldiers do not address, carry-on conversation with or accompany the female inhabitants of this area." At the time this order was issued we were billeted in the village of Ambrieres, Mayenne. There were white soldiers also billeted in the same village but they did not belong to the 92nd. Division and the order did not affect them, hence it was an order for Colored soldiers only. It was not an A.E.F. order. It was a divisional order for Colored soldiers. We were living in the same houses with the French people and under the terms of this order we were forbidden to even speak to the people with whom we lived, while the white soldiers of the 325th. Baking Co. and the Subsupply Depot #10 were allowed to address, visit or accompany these same people where and whenever they desired.

On Jan. 21, 1919 Mademoiselle Marie Meziere, the eldest daughter of Monsieur Charles Meziere, a merchant tailor of Ambeieres was married to Monsieur Maurice Barbe, a French soldier. I was invited to be a guest at the wine party, to accompany the bridal party on the marriage promenade and to be a guest at the supper, which was to take place at 8:30 P.M. I attended the wine party with four other Colored soldiers from the Medical Detachment. No whites were invited but Capt. Willis (white) of the Supply Company "butted in". He spoke miserable french and the members of the party called on the Colored soldiers to interpret for him. Willis became enraged and turned his back on the Colored boys and told the French people that it was improper for them to associate with the black soldiers. The French people paid no attention to what he said and we all left him sitting in the cafe alone. His temperature at this time was at about 104 degrees. The other Colored soldiers returned to the Infirmary and I accompanied the bridal party on the promenade out on the boulevard. There were seven persons in the party; the bride and groom, the bride's sister, the groom's brother and sister, a French soldier and myself. I was the only American. As we reached town on returning from the stroll Colonel George McMaster, Commanding Officer of our regiment accosted me and demanded, "Who are you. What are you doing with these people" I told him and he called a Military Police and ordered me taken to

the Adjutant with orders for the Adjutant to prefer charges against me for accompanying white people. On arriving at the Adjutant's hotel we found Capt. Willis there evidently waiting for me to be brought in. The Adjutant asked only two questions, "Was he with a girl?", "What is your name and to what company do you belong?". Then he said, "Put him in the guard house."

The following afternoon I was ordered to appear for trial. At 1:15 P.M. I was taken through the streets to the Town Major's office by an armed guard who was a private soldier—my rank was not respected. I was called into the room and was surprised to find there was no one present but Major Paul Murry. He read the charges which had me charged with violating the 96th. Article of War and with disobeying General Order No. 40. After reading the charges he asked for my plea. I told him that I did not care to plea that I would exercise my right as a non-commissioned officer to refuse trial in a Summary Court. This was a complete surprise to him. He had no idea that I was aware of my rights. He looked it up in the Manual of Army Court Martials and said that it was my right but I was very foolish to use it. I told him that from the appearance of things there had been no intention of giving me a fair trial. The prosecuting witness was not present, the members of the board were absent and I had not been given an opportunity to call witnesses or secure counsel. At first he tried to frighten and intimidate me by saying that if I were given a General Court Martial trial I would be left in France awaiting trial after my regiment had gone home. He also said that I might get six months in Leavenworth if I should be found guilty. (Can you imagine it—six months for walking on the street with white people). After he saw that he could not intimidate me he assumed the air of comradeship and used all his presuasive powers to entice me to submit to a speedy quiet trial in his kangaroo court but I stood pat. He said that I was trying to play martyr and was trying to make a big fuss out of a little incident, but I claimed that I was standing for a principle, that I had been unjustly treated, that the G.O. was unconstitutional, undemocratic and in direct opposition to principles for which we had fought. I asked that General Pershing be given a copy of the General Order and also a copy of the charges against me. He

laughed at this request and said that the General was too busy for such small matters. He gave me a half an hour to think the matter over and stated that I might get some advice from the officers present. There were only two present. They had come in during the argument. One was Capt. Willis and the other Capt. Benj. Thomas. I took the matter up with Capt. Thomas and in the meantime my Detachment Commander, Major E.B. Simmons (white), of Massachusetts came in and I told him my story. He became indignant and told me to fight it to the last ditch and he would do all in his power to help me. I returned to the court room, and demanded a General Court Martial Trial and a release from the guard house pending trial. Major Murry said that I was making a great mistake and reluctantly gave me a release from the guard house.

That night I visited some of my French friends and found that the whole town was in an uproar over my case. M. Meziere had been to prevail on the Town Mayor in my behalf and was informed that nothing could be done as the Americans had charge of the town. M. Meziere had also called on Brig. Gen Gehardt our Brigade Commander, another Negro-hater of the meanest type. He refused to even give M. Meziere a civil audience. M. Meziere then went to the Town Mayor and swore to an affidavit that my character was of the best, that I was a respected friend of the family and was their invited guest. Mme. Emil Harmon, my landlady also made an affidavit of character in my behalf. I now have both affidavits in my possession.

The following day I was rearrested at my billet and placed in the guard house, contrary to military rules. The Manual of Army Court Martials states that a non-commissioned officer shall not be confined in a guard house with privates but no attention was paid to that rule. No charges were given and no explanation made except that it was Colonel McMaster's orders. I was released that night and sent to my Detachment under "arrest in quarters" Nothing more has been said about the case to this day except at New York when I asked Major Murry when I was going have my trial and he said that the best thing to do was to keep quiet about it.

On March 22, 1919 I was given an honorable discharge from the army, with character grade Excellent and rank of Sergeant M.D. No mention of the case was made on my Service Record.

If I had comitted an offense sufficient to cause me to be arrested twice and placed in the guard house, why was I given an honorable discharge with and Excellent grade character and a non-commissioned officer's rank?

If space would permit I could quote other instances where our boys were shamefully mistreated by the white Americans while in France.

Respectfully yours,

Charles R. Isum

Formerly Sergeant Medical Detachment, 365th. Inf.

P.S. If you should desire a copy of G.O. #40 write to Sergeant-Major Clarence Lee, 3426 Vernon Ave., Chicago, Ill.