


North Carolina's Black WWII Experience

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Video Transcript

UNC-TV Narrator (00:01)

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Mitchell Lewis (00:14)

In his most profound PBS documentary effort ever, Ken Burns captures the gripping realities of World War II through the lives of everyday heroes from hometown America. Tonight we bring you the war's African American experience through little-known, but deeply significant and moving, stories of North Carolina veterans. That's next on Black Issues Forum.

UNC-TV Narrator (00:46)

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Mitchell Lewis (01:21)

Hello everyone and welcome to Black Issues Forum. I'm Mitchell Lewis. The battle for world freedom that took place between 1939 and 1945 has been called America's war. But while American troops fought the horrors of World War II, African American soldiers, sailors, and marines fought a second battle -- one for equal treatment.

Mitchell Lewis (01:44)

Until 1948, all branches of the U.S. Armed Services were racially segregated. Tonight we bring you a unique look at World War II through the personal stories of African American World War II veterans from North Carolina. The first is about the first blacks to serve in the Navy during World War II in anything other than galley positions. Initially African American sailors were relegated to serving as kitchen help and servants to white sailors.

Mitchell Lewis (02:14)

According to the book *American Patriots* by Gail Buckley, in 1942 President Roosevelt offered to establish an all-black marching band partly in response to demands by national African American leaders. All of the sailors came from North Carolina. Esther Vajda has the story.

Esther Vajda (02:33)

The year was 1942. The war was under way. Men from around the country were called to duty, but America's united military front was divided by the color line. In all branches of service, blacks served in segregated units. And in the Navy only white men were allowed to wear a uniform. That is, until the B-1 band came marching in.

Wray Herring (02:54)

Music was our life every day. Music was our life, every day.

Esther Vajda (03:03)

Ray Herring was one of 44 men recruited to form the B-1 marching band. Their task was to play for the students at the UNC Navy pre-flight school at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill. At the band's 65th reunion, Herring reminisced at their original headquarters.

Wray Herring (03:19)

Yeah, we'd line up here and then we'd march, march from here over to the campus, coming up, coming out of here and going down this way to Franklin.

Esther Vajda (03:30)

The men were specifically picked for this task from a large pool of talented musicians from across the state.

Abe Thurman (03:36)

I played piccolo flute and trumpet.

Simeone Holloway (03:37)

I was a member of the school in Durham, NCC, and I heard about this call to black men being recruited. I played the clarinet so I thought I'd try it out. I'd never seen a black musician, anybody, who was in the Navy.

Esther Vajda (03:55)

The men lived in this building in the outskirts of campus. It's now called the Hargraves Recreation Center.

Richard Jones (04:03)

Well, it was just like one big, happy family. And we slept down in the bottom of that building there, and we just got along greatly, all of us.

Abe Thurman (04:14)

And when we go on the street we could out-blow anybody. And so that was our motto, always work the hardest.

Maybe you didn't get along with somebody else but when you played, you played.

Esther Vajda (04:25)

They worked hard to keep the beat for the Navy students all day long.

(04:31)

First of all, raise the flag. Colors, that's the first thing, then we'd start -- the guys got together and we played for them drills back and forth.

Esther Vajda (04:40)

But they did much more than that. Some volunteered at local schools and played at other events around the state. At this reunion, family friends and former neighbors remember the good... and the bad.

Esther Vajda (04:56)

The band's first march in Chapel Hill was here on Franklin Street. It was a way to introduce members to the community. But the reception was far from friendly. Some threw mud, others racial slurs, but by all accounts, band members held their head up high.

Alex Albright (05:12)

They got through that. It was a mostly white crowd on Franklin Street at that time, and got to their barracks here at Hargraves and it was a very different welcome of the communities -- a beautiful -- night and day really.

Esther Vajda (05:23)

Besides their daily marches, band members often didn't leave the barracks. Most areas of the South were deeply segregated at the time and blacks were not allowed to mingle or eat in most restaurants. But many say they found comfort in some corners thanks to community members.

Peggy Misch (05:41)

Sunday night, all the restaurants were closed, the cafeteria at UNC was closed, there was no place for the band members to eat. So Charles Jones, a minister at the University Presbyterian Church, served suppers with President Frank Porter Graham.

Esther Vajda (06:01)

Then UNC President Frank Porter Graham, along with Navy officials and first lady Eleanor Roosevelt collaborated on this pilot program aimed at elevating the ranks of black Navy members. Previously, they were only allowed to be cooks or cleaners.

Alex Albright (06:18)

That was a huge step to see those dress whites, those very, very, smart men, highly intelligent, the best musicians, the best black musicians in the state of North Carolina. You might argue that maybe they were the best *musicians* in the state of North Carolina. They were incredible and just really exceptional people.

Esther Vajda (06:34)

Following their tour of duty in Chapel Hill the men were reassigned to Hawaii where they continued to keep servicemen tapping toes.

Talmadge Neecey (06:44)

I am not a musician, but I love music...

Esther Vajda (06:48)

This Chapel Hill resident was stationed in Hawaii the same time the B-1 band took center stage. He didn't know the men were from his home state. That is, until a week before the reunion. But he clearly remembers the first time he heard them play.

Talmadge Neecey (07:05)

I hear this great martial music, and I get up to see where it's coming from, and here comes the band spit and polish right down the main street of the base there. It was great. They really knew how to play the music, and they could march with a -- they had a -- something in their step just made you feel excited about it.

Esther Vajda (07:26)

After being discharged, these men scattered around the country, but they continued to strike a chord with others.

(07:35)

I want people to know that he -- not only was he an outstanding service man while he was here in Chapel Hill, but after leaving here he went to Beaufort, North Carolina and became a teacher, and was a mentor, a teacher, a friend, and many other things to a lot of young folks, and served as a role model that allowed them to be successful in a lot of different ways.

(07:56)

[In song] Walk on, walk on, with hope in your heart and you'll never walk alone. You'll never...

Esther Vajda (08:11)

As Wray Herring walks down the path he did so many times in the past, he says he can't deny the hard parts of being a B-1 band member in Chapel Hill, but he knows he helped pave the road for others.

Wray Herring (08:25)

Because I was young, and I was learning, so it was an experience, a learning experience for me.

Mitchell Lewis (08:34)

Our next story is about an African American veteran who defied the status quo in the U.S. Navy during World War II. Robert Edward Sharpe served from 1943 to 1955 and was not only among the first African American hospital corpsmen to be trained in the U.S. Navy, he graduated at the top of his class. Robert Sharpe served in the Pacific and is one of few black veterans who witnessed combat. His experience is one of a kind and producer Deborah Holt visited him in his North Carolina home to bring us his story.

Deborah Holt (09:10)

You could say that World War II brought Robert and Jessie Sharpe together. Jessie's aunt was the director of a military hospitality facility called the Hostess House, located on the black marine training camp, Montford Point, in

North Carolina. And she let Jessie work there during the summer of 1944. A year earlier, Robert had moved from his home in Jamaica to Tarboro, North Carolina to live with his father and finish high school. He graduated in 1943 and was drafted into the United States Navy. Robert and Jessie met in high school and their paths crossed again at the Hostess House.

Deborah Holt (09:51)

Robert says over the years he never forgot her face and today, the two are practically newlyweds. With the same clarity that he remembered the face of his beloved, Robert recalls his dark and glorious days of service in the navy.

Robert Sharpe (10:05)

At that particular time, every black person that went into the U.S. Navy went into what they referred to as the steward's branch. And the steward's branch was the branch of the service that served officers in the officer's dining room. And this was all blacks could do. That's all you were allowed to do. And I refused to serve. Once I was assigned my ship, I refused to serve officers, and immediately, I was court-martialed. I was put on bread and water for 30 days.

Robert Sharpe (10:51)

Of course this was something that was reserved for the officers of the Navy. But the enlisted personnel, regardless of their rate, took advantage of that opportunity to take advantage of blacks and order them around with some of the most ridiculous things. And it didn't matter -- some of the most ridiculous things that they asked you to do, to shine their shoes, wash their skivvies, as they said.

Deborah Holt (11:25)

Now the first time they asked you to do something that you felt was demeaning, what did you do?

Robert Sharpe (11:32)

I told them to go to hell. I am not shining your shoes, and I will not wash your skivvies, you do it yourself.

Deborah Holt (11:43)

Over the course of the next two years, Robert was disciplined for resisting treatment as a second-class sailor. He was on punishment when this photo was taken. [To Robert] Now this is you painting, there's actually a smile on your face.

Robert Sharpe (11:56)

Yes, I'm over the water here. I'm over the water.

Deborah Holt (12:02)

Oh I see.

Robert Sharpe (12:02)

This is all water behind me here, so I'm suspended on the side of the ship painting a boom.

Deborah Holt (12:09)

But you were being punished.

Robert Sharpe (12:10)

They can't break me. They can't break me. I keep smiling.

Deborah Holt (12:14)

Even in the midst of all these trials, Robert found time to excel as a boxer.

Robert Sharpe (12:20)

I would play in the band, the ship's band. I did everything. Played in the band, never played an instrument in my life, but these two fellows were professional musicians.

Deborah Holt (12:33)

He also served in combat.

Robert Sharpe (12:35)

We found pockets of Japanese in the Pacific, our ship and a destroyer fleet was sent in to wipe out the Japanese group. And that's what we're doing. Here I'm here with a ** sub-machine gun, and these are all, we're going on a raid on the islands here.

Deborah Holt (12:56)

From the folds of a scrapbook, a drawing sparks his memory of a fascinating story.

Robert Sharpe (13:01)

Our ship found an uncharted island in the Pacific. And they sent a crew to the island, and they killed all but one of the crew. The ones that came back told the commanding officer, "The people on this island are black." So he then sent me with a box of jewelry -- that shiny thing. Never did anything like this before in my life. The ship's cook did this sketch.

Robert Sharpe (13:44)

One of the things we did, we went in after the atomic bomb was dropped on Japan in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, we went to bury the dead. And we dug huge graves, and just dumped everybody in it.

Deborah Holt (14:07)

When you think about your entire overall experience in the military, what was the particular hell that you went through?

Robert Sharpe (14:17)

It was a heart-wrenching scene to see children, women, men, animals completely burned to a crisp. And we were sent there to give aid and comfort to the survivors. And I don't know if it's still there today, but we set up the international cemetery in which we buried an awful lot of people. And I said at that time, "I hope to God never, ever, to see this again."

Deborah Holt (15:05)

What is your feeling about the military and about serving America in general today?

Robert Sharpe (15:15)

That's a good question. My loyalty to America can never be challenged. This is my country. I would defend it with my life. But, at the same time, I am not the president, or part of his cabinet, but I think it is foolish to try to preserve somewhere else what is not evident at home.

Mitchell Lewis (15:57)

The first African Americans to serve in the U.S. Marines since the American Revolution trained at the swampy camp Montford Point in North Carolina. Until the enlistment of these Marines, the U.S. Marines had remained the only branch of the American military that excluded blacks altogether. On June 25th, 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed executive order 8802, which allowed for the enlistment of blacks in the U.S. Marine Corps. In August of 1942 a segregated training facility opened on an area of Camp Lejeune called Montford Point. The story of the first black Marines is captured in a documentary called "The Marines of Montford Point: Fighting for Freedom." Right now we'll meet one Montford Pointer and his brother, both who fought in World War II along with four of their other brothers. Deborah Holt sat down with them to bring us this story.

Deborah Holt (16:53)

To help America's war effort during World War II, Haywood and Gerturde Poole, of the Oberlin Community in West Raleigh, North Carolina sent six of their seven boys to fight overseas. All six sons returned safely, but today, only the two youngest live to tell of their experiences. Older brother Frances served in the U.S. Army's 184th infantry engineers.

Francis Poole (17:18)

I was eighteen years old at the time, and they drafted me out of Virginia. I was on the ship fourteen days. I stayed sick fourteen days. Seasickness. And we was in a convoy, and when you get seasick, that's the worst thing in the world. Ain't on medicine, no drugstore can help you. We went to France and went over the Germany, Luxembourg, oh maybe five, four or five more countries.

Francis Poole (18:01)

I got in the medics, I was in the medics. They put me in the medics in Texas. I helped get the soldiers off the battlefield, you know, when they get killed, and I'd haul some of them. Some got killed in the foxholes. I was all over Germany and places like that.

Wanda Perry Poole (18:27)

If a soldier had been hurt he would go with the physicians, and if the soldier was dead, the medics had to pick the body up, put it in a bag and tag him. So they had to dig holes just like those men who were fighting dug holes because if they heard something say "boom," they had to jump in the hole too, just like the soldiers would. So they actually ended up on the front lines while the action was taking place. They were trying to save lives, and they were trying to pick up the deceased so they could bring their bodies back.

Wanda Perry Poole (19:04)

He seemed to have enjoyed his work, although somebody had to die almost for them to, you know, for them to pick them up. They didn't put any live people in a bag. But if they were deceased the doctor moved on, and they had to pick up the bodies. They brought their trucks to the front lines, and they -- turning, and twisting, sometimes one truck would get in the way of another, and that's how he said he got hurt, was between two trucks. They had just picked up some bodies and they were trying to recede, go back where they came from and one truck came a little bit too close to the other truck. So therefore, his back was hurt.

Deborah Holt (19:50)

While Francis and his brothers Haywood Jr., Joseph, William, and Jonathan served as soldiers in the U.S. Army, his younger brother Hubert was the only one to enlist in the Marines. He'd been the co-captain of his football team in high school, and felt fit for this branch of service that had only recently begun to accept black volunteers and recruits. He still has the journal he wrote in during his mission in the South West Pacific.

Deborah Holt (20:18)

Thanksgiving daily routine. Another LST met us going toward Guam, number 999, everything as usual, shower.

Deborah Holt (20:32)

He keeps just a few other items of remembrance, and reads the notes he wrote when he was just a teenager called to manhood in service to his country as a U.S. Marine during World War II.

Hubert Poole (20:44)

We were at Guam on D-Day. D-Day's the day they go in, that's when the killings start. We were what we call a Marine ammunition company. We held the ammunition. When the ammunition came in from the United States, we took it off the boats, put it in our ammunition camp, and when the group was getting ready to go on an invasion, we would take that same ammunition and put it on another ship so they could have the ammunition. So we were ammunition. 4th Marine Ammunition Company.

Deborah Holt (21:18)

Francis Poole was discharged from the Army in the summer of 1945, and on Christmas Day, Hubert Poole received his discharge.

Mitchell Lewis (21:28)

In addition to the many young men who served our country during World War II, young women served as well. One of those young women is a life long resident of Raleigh. Millie Dunn Veasey volunteered for the Women's Army Corps and was one of the first African American women to serve overseas. Reporter Alison Miller has her story.

Allison Miller (21:50)

At 89 years old, Millie Dunn Veasey has collected an impressive number of commendations.

Millie Dunn Veasey (21:56)

One has to do his share, all of us.

Allison Miller (21:59)

Her living room walls proudly host old Army photos and newspaper clippings, but like many of her male

counterparts, Veasey wasn't always so open about her time in the service.

Millie Dunn Veasey (22:09)

We never, nobody would know, you know, I never could talk to anybody.

Allison Miller (22:13)

One of six children of a widowed mother, Veasey joined the army in 1943 in part because she couldn't pay to go to college, and also because she says it was the right thing to do.

Millie Dunn Veasey (22:23)

If white women are going in, you know, to help, you know, then black women ought to also go to be a part to help, as a part of this. We're all in this thing together.

Allison Miller (22:38)

While many women served as nurses during the war, Dunn Veasey worked as a clerk.

Millie Dunn Veasey (22:42)

You had their records and everything, you had to keep their records and send them off.

Allison Miller (22:47)

And was one of more than 600 selected as the first Afro-American women's unit to go overseas. She says while the military was still segregated, she never personally experienced any hostilities.

Millie Dunn Veasey (23:01)

Black man had some very horrible stories to say. Some of the women who were on the camp of black women where they had black and white women on the campus, they had some maybe horrible stories. I don't have, I haven't had that experience.

Allison Miller (23:20)

Instead, what Dunn Veasey remembers is the awe of rural Europeans seeing black people for the first time.

Millie Dunn Veasey (23:25)

They thought we were women in technicolor.

Allison Miller (23:31)

Arriving first by boat to Scotland, Dunn Veasey eventually was sent to Birmingham, England, where she worked sorting mail. The job itself was particularly dangerous, but she could hear German buzz bombing almost every day in the distance.

Millie Dunn Veasey (23:43)

You were awfully frightened, awfully frightened.

Allison Miller (23:47)

However, not all of Dunn Veasey's overseas experience was so tense. This picture, for instance, was taken by the daughter of a British family whom she became close with while living in Birmingham.

Millie Dunn Veasey (23:59)

I would go over Sunday afternoon, when they would have tea. I never had a meal with them, but they would have tea at four, you know, in England, they have tea at four. And that girl -- there was the mother and the father and the daughter. And I, after I came back to the states for years, I wrote to them.

Allison Miller (24:22)

England was also the place Dunn Veasey learned of the Allied victory in Europe.

Millie Dunn Veasey (24:56)

It was marvelous. I was only *V Day* in London, and when we went down we are able to go down when the changing of the guard, when the people came out, what have you, they came out down at the palace, that you would come down, it was just a celebration.

Allison Miller (24:56)

Three days later Dunn Veasey headed to France where she spent another nine months as a supply staff sergeant before returning home. She says what she remembers most from her service was both the bond she developed with fellow soldiers...

Millie Dunn Veasey (25:07)

The friendship, the camaraderie, that one has, lasted you forever.

Allison Miller (25:17)

... and a sense of accomplishment in serving one's country.

Millie Dunn Veasey (25:19)

It gives one a sense of, I guess helping mankind, not all for self, really.

Mitchell Lewis (25:41)

We're honored to have had the privilege to bring you these stories about North Carolina's African American World War II experience. On behalf of the Black Issues Forum production team, we say thank you to all those American veterans who have served to protect our country and secured freedom throughout the world. For more information about tonight's program, visit us online at UNCTV.org/bif. You can also call us on the BIF line at 919-549-7167. For Black Issues Forum, I'm Mitchell Lewis, thanks for watching.

PBS Narrator (26:47)

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