



By DICK MILLER  
Highland School Librarian  
THE NEGRO SOLDIER\*

The struggle of the American colonies for freedom from England had an added meaning for Negroes. In fighting for American independence, they also fought for their own freedom. This desire has characterized their participation in every military struggle since then.

On March 5, 1770, the Boston Massacre occurred. That was the first time the colonists openly showed their resentment and hostility to England's oppressive taxation laws. The first colonist killed on that day was Crispus Attucks, a runaway slave and seaman.

At the very outset of the American Revolution, the minutemen stood against the English forces and routed them. One of those minutemen



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was Peter Salem, a former slave from Framingham, Massachusetts. At Bunker Hill, a British officer stood above his troops and shouted "The day is ours!" Peter Salem, who had anticipated that moment, fired with deadly aim, mortally wounding the British leader. Salem was thereafter recognized as one of the outstanding heroes of the Battle of Bunker Hill.

Approximately 5,000 Negro soldiers served the cause of American independence. When the

war first broke out, most of the colonies were not in favor of enlisting Negroes. General Washington, however, became alarmed when he learned that the English were enlisting them. On his advice, enlistments were opened to free Negroes in 1776. For the many slaves who wanted to fight, there was still no opportunity. Alexander Hamilton, who was then an aide-de-camp to Washington, strongly disagreed with this practice. Manpower was needed and that was all there was to it, he felt. He remarked at that time, "The contempt we have been taught to entertain for the blacks makes us fancy things that are founded neither in reason or experience." Eventually most of the northern colonies and some of the southern colonies enlisted Negroes, both free and slave. The majority of them, however, were from the North. There were only a few separate Negro fighting units. Two Negro companies were formed in Massachusetts. One was under the command of a Negro, Captain Middletown. Negroes were in practically every military action between 1775 and 1781.

In the War of 1812, Negroes joined with other Americans in the defense of our young nation. Navy Captain Oliver H. Perry gave unstinted praise to the Negro members of his crew. A Negro seaman, John Johnson, was praised by his captain as a man who "...ought to be registered in the book of fame, and remembered with reverence as long as bravery is considered a virtue." In the Battle of Chalmetts Plains, commonly known as the Battle of New Orleans, Negroes fought under General Andrew Jackson. General Jackson told them that he intended to inform the President of their heroic conduct.

The Civil War had not been underway for very long when the question of the participation of the Negro became a serious public issue. Southern landowners, in particular, were against enlisting them. Not only would it create a labor shortage for them, but they were fearful that once Negroes fought for freedom they would start slave riots. The military history of the Civil War shows, however, that Negro soldiers fought in all the great battles. Approximately 50,000 Negro soldiers lost their lives in the Civil War and many more were wounded.

In America's war with Spain in 1898, the Negro again played a dramatic role. When a U.S. battleship, the "Maine," was blown up, thirty Negroes were on board. Of that number

22 were killed and four were wounded. Four regular Negro units and several state militia organizations saw active service in Cuba. A Southern officer remarked at that time that, despite his upbringing, he had come to respect the Negro soldiers who fought around him. He especially praised the Tenth Cavalry. Charles Young, the first Negro graduate from West Point, commanded the Tenth Cavalry. At the beginning of World War I he was the highest ranking Negro officer in the armed forces.

The Negro soldier's courageous conduct in World War I, along with the gallantry of the whole American army under the command of General Pershing, contributed to the victory of November 11, 1918. The 92nd Division, in particular, received numerous awards.

During World War II over a million Negro men were drafted. Approximately a half-million served overseas. During the course of the war, Negroes served in practically all branches of the armed services. High military officials and the Secretary of War praised the heroism and services of these soldiers. Many units received Presidential citations. Individual soldiers also received recognition. Among these were Private George Watson, who received the Distinguished Service Cross, and messman, Dorie Miller, and cook, William Pinckney, who received the Navy Cross for outstanding heroism. Dorie Miller's citation read: "Without previous experience...manned a machine gun in the face of serious fire during the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941, on the Battleship Arizona, shooting down four enemy planes."

The Merchant Marine was the only branch of the armed services that was fully integrated during the war. Negroes had fought in every major military struggle in which the United States was involved, but usually in segregated units. In 1940, the first major step was made toward ending segregation in the armed forces. It was the Selective Service Act which prohibited, discrimination in the selection and training of men. Integrated regiments were still prohibited, however. The Act of 1940 clearly stated that policy. It was felt, as it had been in previous wars, that the friction caused by integrating the units would detract from effective fighting.

On July 26, 1948, President Truman issued an historic Executive Order which established in the United States armed forces, "equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons, without regard to race, color, or national origin."

\*Stratton, Madeline Robinson. NEGROES WHO HELPED BUILD AMERICA. Ginn & Co., 1965.

NEW BOOKS in the NEWS

YES I CAN

"Sammy Davis Story Makes a Good Book"  
By Dorothy Johnson

YES I CAN, the story of Sammy Davis, is the best book of its kind I have ever read. It left such an impression on me that although I am neither a writer nor book reviewer, I was stimulated to express my opinion of the book in writing, and submitted same to the VOICE with the hope it may be published.

The story of Sammy Davis is the American success story told many times in book form and in the movies. Here is a Harlem born youngster who was in show business at age two with his father and uncle. The uncle, I am told, was actually a friend.

Sammy Davis who is generally acknowledged as the greatest entertainer in the profession is truly a product of show business. In his story, he relates his mother was a chorus girl, but he seldom saw her after his parents were separated.

Now, of course, Sammy Davis is securely ensconced on his pinnacle in the highest echelon of the theatrical world. He is one of the super stars of stage, screen and television. He commands astronomical weekly salaries, and his close association with Frank Sinatra, the kingpin of show business, automatically indicates the bracket of his status.

YES I CAN is more than just the success story of a Negro boy from Harlem. It is also a study of the Negro's problems in this country. Naturally, Sammy's story is not that of the average American Negro, but Negroes suffer common problems in the struggle for dignity, recognition and achievement, no matter what the quest.

Sammy Davis had his troubles in the army, and since he has become a famous star, he has had his troubles. Some of his troubles have been of his own making, for Sammy Davis is not a submissive man. But his telling of the refusal of admission to New York night clubs, and his recollection of several "liberal" cocktail parties, while described with amusing irony, is actually rather shocking.

THERE IS MOVING candor in the passages of his marriage to a white girl, the beautiful Mai Britt. This romance, his conversion to Judaism, and such isolated moments as an uncomfortable meeting with his mother between stage shows, are deeply touching in human terms.

Shared also are the always exciting tales of opening nights and the performer's constant apprehension "Will I reach my audience?" Never have these intimate backstage moments been better described.

Sammy Davis is one of the few entertainers who has done it all. He has played vaudeville and the cream of supper clubs and night clubs. He has starred on Broadway in two successful musical comedies. His is a familiar and welcome face on television and in motion pictures. You can learn about all these phases of entertainment through Sammy's struggles within them.

Sammy hasn't drawn a pretty picture of himself. He is too proud and too honest an individual for that. But he, Jane and Burt Boyar, his co-authors, have written a beautiful book. If you can read between the lines, you will realize something has been left out. But the struggle is told here unflinchingly; against a resistant white community, a resentful Negro world, and most of all, against himself. You are made to realize this struggle is not half over, but that Sammy has found a peace of mind that had never been his before. He reveals it in this passage from his book:

"Despite all the problems, America is still the best country in the world. Even with the tensions, the equality which is still only a technical thing—despite these things, I became a star. With everything going against me, I was able to make it in America.

"It could never have happened for me in England. I don't know of any Negro who started with nothing and made it there. Social equality is all they have for the Negro there. In America, although we have far less social equality, we have constantly expanding opportunity, and that has to be the best. Social acceptance is delightful, but it's only ice cream and cake—opportunity is the meat and vegetables.

YES I CAN by Sammy Davis with Jan & Burt Boyar 612 pages. (Farrar, Strauss and Giroux \$6.95).

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