



Fighting for the Right to Fight: African American Experiences During WWII

September 27, 2018 – December 2018

In the years leading up to World War II, racial segregation and discrimination were part of daily life for many in the United States. For most African Americans, even the most basic rights and services were fragmented or denied altogether. To be black was to know the limits of freedom—excluded from the very opportunity, equality, and justice on which the country was founded.

Yet, once World War II began, thousands of African Americans rushed to enlist, intent on serving the nation that treated them as second-class citizens. They were determined to fight to preserve the freedom that they themselves had been denied. This is their story.

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

Fighting for the Right to Fight begins with an overview of America in the 1920s—at the height of the Ku Klux Klan's power—where segregation and discrimination were part of daily life for African Americans. Discriminatory practices were condoned and even codified by the government. Many military leaders declared African Americans unfit to serve in combat.

The special exhibition examines how hopes of equality inspired many to enlist, the discouraging reality of the segregated noncombat roles given to black recruits, and the continuing fight for "Double Victory" that laid the groundwork for the Civil Rights Movement.

Through oral histories, profile panels, and artifacts, visitors discover the wartime stories of individual service members who took part in this extraordinary challenge, from unheralded heroes to famous names—including Alex Haley, author of *Roots* (US Coast Guard); Benjamin Davis, Jr. (US Army Air Forces); Medgar Evers (US Army); and more.

The centerpiece of the exhibit is an original eight-minute video about the Tuskegee Airmen, who in many ways became the focus of African American participation during the war. The piece is narrated by TV personality Robin Roberts, whose own father flew with the Tuskegee Airmen during the war.