

## **Famous Black Americans in the Military**

**Introduction:** Even though the United States military has only been desegregated since 1947, Black Americans have been playing a role in military history since the American Revolution. In this activity, students will learn about some famous Black Americans and their roles in the history of the United States military.

**Grade level:**

Late elementary to middle school

**Illinois Educational Standards Addressed:**

16.A.3a Describe how historians use models for organizing historical interpretation (e.g., biographies, political events, issues and conflicts).

16.A.3b Make inferences about historical events and eras using historical maps and other historical sources.

16.A.4a Analyze and report historical events to determine cause-and-effect relationships.

16.B.4b (W) Identify political ideas from the early modern historical era to the present which have had worldwide impact.

16.B.5b (US) Analyze how United States political history has been influenced by the nation's economic, social and environmental history.

**Activity:** First, students should look over the names and descriptions and see if they can guess who is who. Have they heard of any of the people listed? Then students can use their books, the Internet, or the books listed in the bibliography to find the answers.

Match the names of these Black military heroes with the information about them.

**People:**

- A. Thomas C. Butler
- B. Doris "Dorie" Miller
- C. Crispus Attucks
- D. Lemuel Haynes
- E. Vernon J. Baker
- F. Colin Powell
- G. Martin Robinson Delany
- H. Milton Olive III
- I. Henry O. Flipper
- J. Paul Cuffe
- K. Benjamin O. Davis, Jr.
- L. James Reese Europe

**Descriptions:**

1. \_\_\_ helped supply the American colonies during the American Revolution, smuggling goods past British patrol ships. He went on to build a large whaling and shipping business, and some historians consider him the father of Black nationalism in the United States.
2. \_\_\_ led the 1770 uprising against British troops that resulted in the Boston Massacre. It is alleged that he cried out, "Don't be afraid!" as he led the crowd of protesters against armed British soldiers.
3. \_\_\_ served as a minuteman during the American Revolution, fighting at the siege of Boston and at Fort Ticonderoga. After the war he studied Greek and Latin and became a Congregationalist minister.
4. \_\_\_ recruited Black soldiers and served as a field commander in the American Civil War. He earned the rank of major--the highest rank of any Black soldier during the war. He also attended Harvard Medical School, bought and sold real estate, and wrote several books.
5. \_\_\_ became the first Black to graduate from the United States Military Academy at West Point, in 1877. He was later dishonorably discharged as a result of trumped-up charges, but the discharge was changed to honorable in 1976, and he was granted a full pardon in 1999.
6. \_\_\_ led a Black army unit in the Filipino Insurrection after the Spanish-American War, and his bravery earned official recognition in 1900 after he and 17 other men held off a force of nearly 250 enemy soldiers.
7. \_\_\_ served as a lieutenant in the segregated 369th Infantry Regiment (the "Harlem Hellfighters") during World War I, and became the first Black officer to lead troops into combat during the war. His military band also helped popularize American jazz music in France.
8. \_\_\_ led his 25-man platoon in a daring assault against dug-in German positions during World War II, destroying six machine gun positions and killing 26 soldiers. He was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for his efforts in 1997.
9. \_\_\_ led the 99th Pursuit Squadron and the 332nd Fighter Group (both part of the Tuskegee Army) during World War II, and became the first Black general of the United States Air Force.
10. \_\_\_ served as a messman on the battleship West Virginia at Pearl Harbor. During the Japanese

surprise attack in 1941, he carried the ship's commander to safety and then shot down at least two enemy aircraft. He received the Navy Cross for his valiant efforts.

11. \_\_\_ saved the lives of four other army soldiers during a firefight early in the Vietnam War by hurling his body onto a grenade that enemy soldiers had thrown. He was posthumously (after he died) awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.

12. \_\_\_ twice wounded in combat during the Vietnam War, served as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the Persian Gulf War, and was appointed secretary of state by President George W. Bush.

Answers:

1. J
2. C
3. D
4. G
5. I
6. A
7. L
8. E
9. K
10. B
11. H
12. F

**Resources at the Pritzker Military Library (Also available through interlibrary loan)**

Baker, Vernon J. *Lasting Valor*. New York: Bantam Books, 1999.  
Call number: D811 .B285 1999

Flipper, Henry Ossian. *Black Frontiersman: The Memories of Henry O. Flipper, First Black Graduate of West Point*. Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1997.  
Call number: F786 .F575 1997

Harris, Stephen L. *Harlem's Hell Fighters: the African-American 369<sup>th</sup> Infantry in World War I*. Washington, D.C.: Brasseys, Inc., 2003  
Call number: D570.33 369<sup>TH</sup> .H37 2003

Lanning, Michael Lee. *The African-American Soldier: from Crispus Attucks to Colin Powell*. Secaucus, New Jersey: Carol Publishing, 1997.  
Call number: UB418 .A47 A35

Mikaelian, Allen. *Medal of Honor: Profiles of America's Military Heroes from the Civil War to the Present*. New York: Hyperion, 2002.  
Call number: UB433 .M53 2002

Powell, Colin L. *My American Journey*. New York: Random House, 1995.  
Call number: E840.5 .P68 A3 1995

Roth, David. *Sacred Honor: A Biography of Colin Powell*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993.  
Call number: E840.5 .P68 R67 1993