

A SOLDIER'S PLAY

COMPANION RESOURCE GUIDE ON BLACK MILITARY HISTORY

Created by Minnesota Humanities Center



In celebration of **Roundabout Theatre Company's** Tony Award-winning revival of "A Soldier's Play" coming to the Ordway Theater, the Minnesota Humanities Center has put together a set of resources for playgoers interested in gaining a better understanding of the Black military experience across U.S. history.

Charles Fuller's Pulitzer Prize-winning play examines the 1944 murder of a Black sergeant on a fictional segregated Louisiana Army base. The play exposes the systemic racism in the military and society, and draws attention to the irony of these World War II soldiers eager to fight for freedom elsewhere while still facing discrimination at home and in the military.

This guide provides a brief overview of African American military service across U.S. history, as well as a short list of additional resources that delve into the long history of Black service members' bravery in the face of discrimination.



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A Brief History of the Black Military Experience

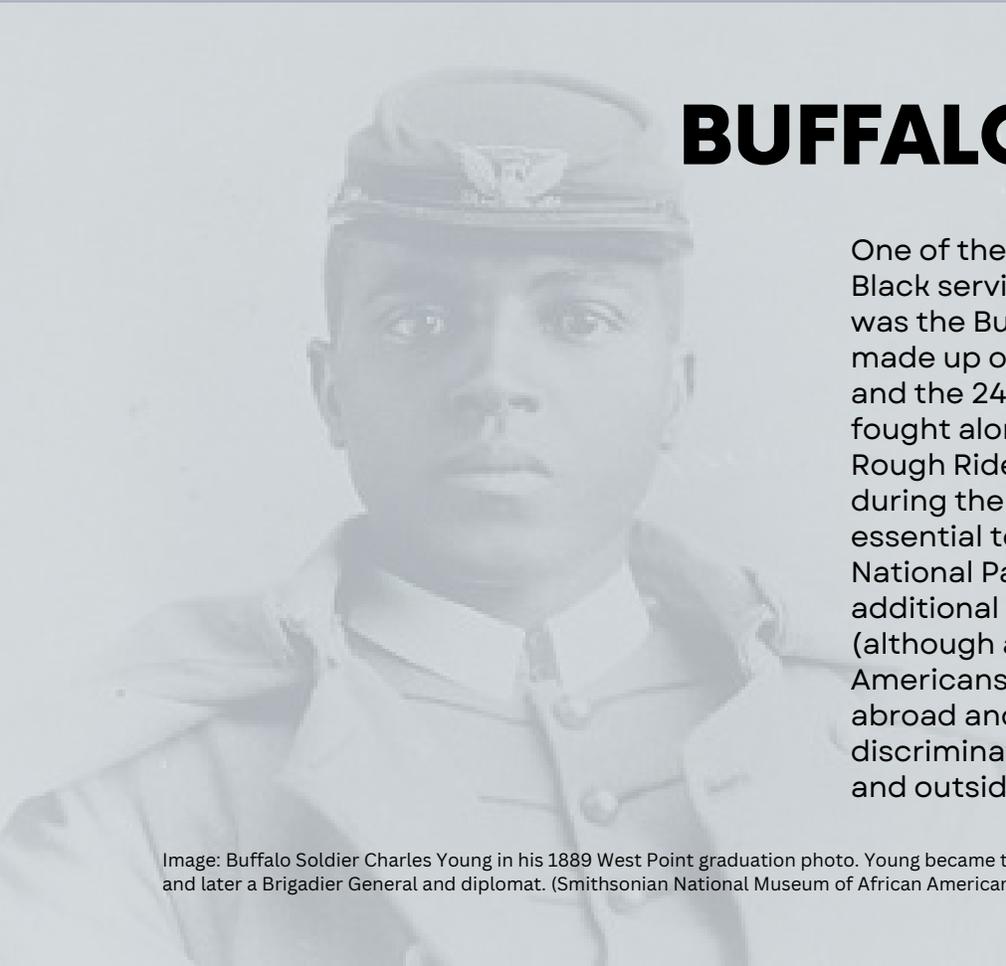
REVOLUTIONARY WAR

African Americans have served in the military since our nation's founding, yet never with the pay, respect, or benefits that white soldiers received. While there are reports of numerous free Blacks serving in the Revolutionary War like Crispus Attucks, there were also those enticed by Lord Dunmore's Proclamation in 1775 to serve England in return for their freedom.

CIVIL WAR

At the beginning of the Civil War, enslaved Black men began self-emancipating, fleeing from Confederate states and joining the Union Army, taking on whatever unofficial roles they could, often hard labor or domestic work. However, following President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, the service of Black soldiers became sanctioned, and by the end of the war, 10% of Union troops were Black. The **U.S. Colored Troops** saw combat and risked their lives for 70% of the pay rate of white soldiers, with worse conditions, and a larger target on their backs from enemies.

BUFFALO SOLDIERS



One of the most influential groups of Black service members in U.S. history was the Buffalo Soldiers, a regiment made up of the 9th and 10th Cavalries and the 24th and 25th Infantries. They fought alongside Theodore Roosevelt's Rough Riders on San Juan Hill in Cuba during the Spanish American War, were essential to the early growth of the National Park Service, and aided in additional westward expansion efforts (although at the expense of Native Americans). Despite their contributions abroad and at home, these men faced discrimination and attacks both inside and outside of the military.

Image: Buffalo Soldier Charles Young in his 1889 West Point graduation photo. Young became the first Black national park superintendent, and later a Brigadier General and diplomat. (Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture)



World War I

Only a small percentage of the 400,000 Black service members in World War I saw action in Europe. Despite their eagerness to serve their country, these men were still often forced into jobs at the bottom of the military service chain, in segregated units and housing, and few were ever given an opportunity to prove themselves on the battlefield.

There were exceptions though. The 369th Army Infantry Regiment, also known as the **Harlem Hellfighters**, served longer on the frontlines than any other American unit. Their bravery won them not just awards and parades at home, but also France's Croix de Guerre military medal.

Upon return home though, during what is now called the Red Summer of 1919, many of these troops were attacked, lynched, and driven out of their homes and churches by white mobs.

World War II

During World War II, Black soldiers risked their lives to fight fascism overseas, despite still being denied equal voting rights, employment opportunities, housing, or education at home. Serving in segregated military units, these 900,000 Black soldiers were instrumental in the success of the war. This also marks the first war in which women, Black and white, were enlisted into service, although they had helped previous war efforts in a variety of ways both at home and abroad.

Of particular note were the **Tuskegee Airmen**, an elite squadron of Black pilots whose abilities and success helped change public opinions and create opportunities for military careers, rather than just service during wartime.

Following the war in 1948, President Harry S. Truman signed Executive Order 9981 which mandated the desegregation of the U.S. military. However, the government still denied equal rights to Black soldiers in other ways, with white soldiers and their families reaping the GI Bill benefits.

Image: Members of the 369th Infantry Regiment (Harlem Hellfighters) posing with their awards for gallantry in combat (National Archives)

Vietnam War - Present

By the Vietnam War, the U.S. military was fully integrated, and Black Americans served at their highest rates yet, but were twice as likely to die in combat. During the Gulf War, their record of service continued, making up 22% of the Army.

According to the Army data, the percentage of Black Americans serving in the Army is generally higher than the percentage of Black Americans in the general population.

While discrimination continues to exist in the military, Black service members have finally been able to attain the rank and respect they deserve, with men like (retired) Gen. Colin Powell and women like Gen. Lorna Mahlock making a mark in the military.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

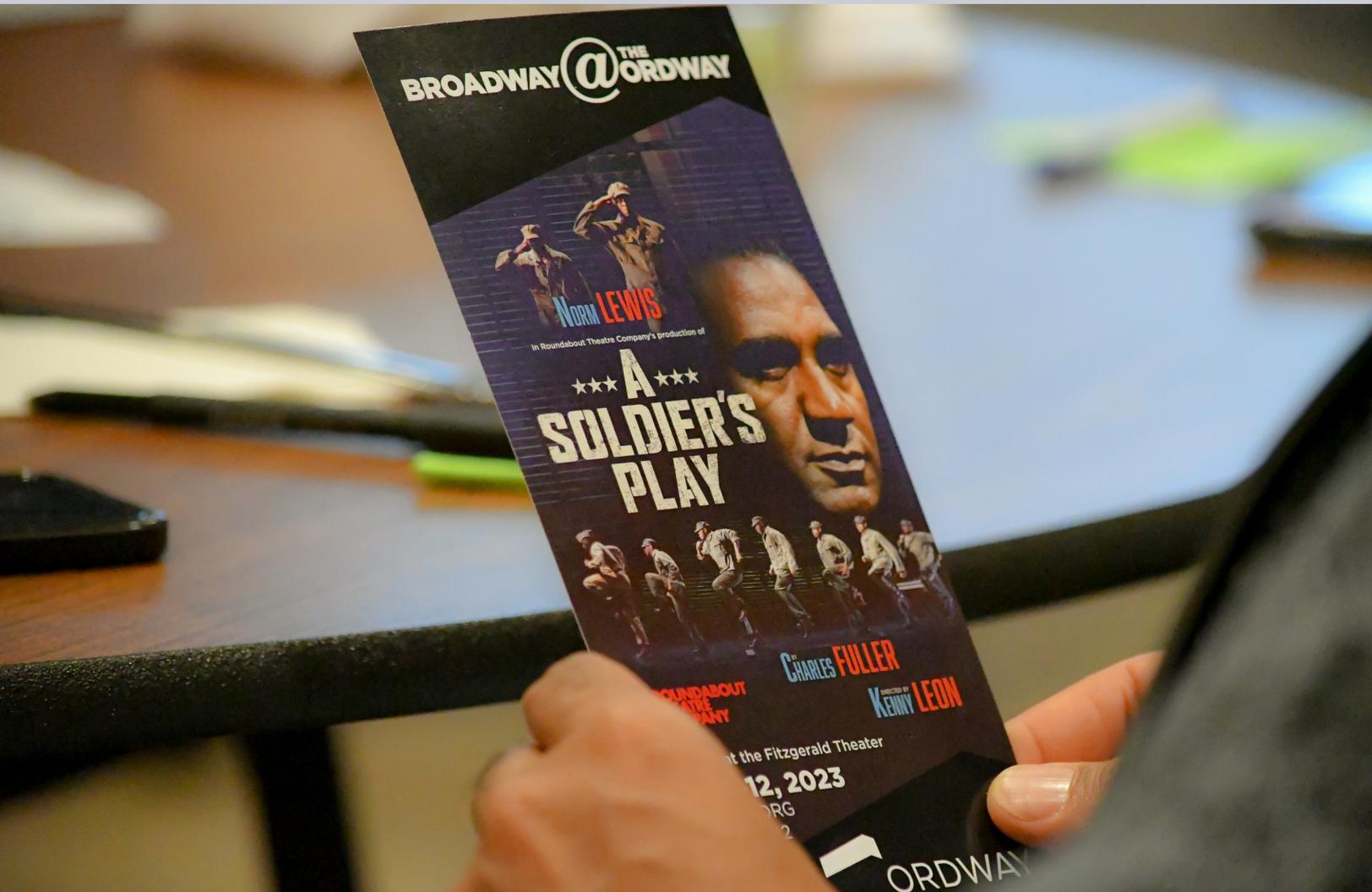
What surprised you about the play, or what did you learn?

What role did framing the play as a whodunnit mystery have on the content?

List three obvious inequities that were visible in the play, as well as three veiled ways in which racism was evident.

What are some commonalities between what you saw in the fictional world of Fort Neal in 1944 versus what you see in modern Minnesota with the killing of George Floyd, police reform, unequal justice, or segregation due to red lining?

How does this play make you consider the ways in which other groups have been discriminated against in the military?



BLACK MILITARY HISTORY

10 DIGITAL RESOURCES FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION



- 1** **Patriots of Color**
Online biographies of Revolutionary War soldiers
- 2** **Glorious March to Liberty**
Digital exhibit of African American Civil War Soldiers
- 3** **A Divided Nation Fights For Freedom**
Digital exhibit on U.S. Colored Troops and self emancipation
- 4** **A Triumph or Tragedy: The Life of Charles Young**
Documentary from Buffalo Soldiers National Monument
- 5** **Targeting Black Veterans**
Equal Justice Initiative report on attacks against Black Veterans
- 6** **We Return Fighting**
Video, exhibit, and resources on African American soldiers in WWI
- 7** **Black Women in the Military**
Article from the National Association of Black Military Women
- 8** **Freedom to Serve: Desegregation of the Armed Forces**
Collection of 247 historic documents on post-WWII desegregation
- 9** **African American Veterans Share Their Experiences in Vietnam**
Video interviews with three Vietnam War Veterans
- 10** **Timeline of Black Military History**
Interactive visual timeline of Black military service in the U.S.