

Black Warriors: The Buffalo Soldiers of World War II

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iUniverse

Unknown (pp)

978-1-936236-40-4

Black Warriors: The Buffalo Soldiers of World War II is dedicated to giving an accurate account of the little known story of the only black infantry to fight in Europe. Despite suffering discrimination and segregation in the army, the men served with distinction. Ivan Houston presents a well-written account and recollection of their service in what amounts to a legacy of honor. The valorous achievements of these brave men need to be recognized and raised to their rightful place in American history.

Combat Regiment Team 370 of the 92nd Infantry Division, better known as the “Buffalo Division,” was comprised of young, untrained, and uneducated black Americans. A small complement of the unit were college men, including the author, who was only nineteen years old. The regiment’s mission was to cross the Arno River in Italy and break through the German’s Gothic Line, a highly-fortified position stretching hundreds of miles from the sea across the Apennine Mountains.

As the regiment’s recorder, radio operator, and intelligence officer, Houston compiled minute-by-minute records of his unit’s activities assembled from continuous reports from the men in the battlefield. Owing to the extensively well-documented records, the book is rich in detailed account. Houston not only succeeds in describing compelling historic encounters and achievements of his fellow black soldiers, but sets the record straight about allegations made by white commanding officers that black soldiers were unwilling to stand up and fight. Houston explains, for example, why officers and platoon leaders were being killed: they were trying to lead men who all their lives had been treated as second-class citizens. On the other hand, records indicate no shortage of valor displayed by the black troops, who eventually succeeded in helping defeat a retreating German army. On the day the war was declared over, Italians cheered the black soldiers and blew kisses for their liberation. Here Houston brings to light the painful irony that the soldiers must have felt at the moment of victory. White Italians showered their black liberators with love while back in America these heroes remained second-class citizens. As Houston so succinctly writes: “We were fighting the Nazis with one hand and Jim Crow with the other.” The irony of warring both the awesome power of their enemy and the racism in their own ranks speaks to the undervalued service bestowed to their country by these brave soldiers.

Black Warriors is straightforward in its description of events. There is little hyperbole or need to overdramatize. The reader encounters moving episodes of combat constituting the factual and historic efforts made by Combat Team 370. During the course of their grueling missions, most of the men, though untested and untrained, undertook veritable suicide attacks on a highly-trained and deadly enemy. Naturally, the missions took a great toll. Owing to the nature of the missions, some soldiers straggled behind or panicked in the heat of battle. However, the author controverts in a convincing manner the allegations of cowardice made by high-ranking white commanders, making it clear that the charges were unfounded and racially motivated.

GARY KLINGA (July 29, 2011)

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