

Service – Episode 4 – George Hardy

Episode Transcript

Radio program, “What Are We Fighting For”: What are we fighting for? The best soldiers in the world are the ones who know what they’re fighting for...”

[Theme music comes in]

Host: In 1944, stuck during an overnight train layover in route to a G.I. hospital, Corporal Rupert Trimmingham awoke hungry and so went out with a few other soldiers for a bite. At the station cafe, the corporal was told they would only be served if they eat in the kitchen. They were in Louisiana. And these American soldiers were black.

Veteran William Walker: They had black sailor loading ammunition and unloading ammunition. And it blew up. And killed over 100 of all the black.

Veteran Bob Hanson: The blacks, they were just given and was menial jobs. I would get incensed.

Veteran Lawson Ichiro Sakai: Before we get to Camp Shelby, we'd see a white person walking and a black person was walking. And the black person would jump off the curb. We were dumbfounded.

Host: Welcome to Service: Stories of Hunger and War, a production from iHeartRadio and me, your host, Jacqueline Raposo.

[music shifts to a soft guitar version of Simple Gifts]

Host: The "What are we fighting for?" call to serve in World War II for those with specific racial and ethnic identities contained huge levels of hypocrisy. We should be rightly appalled by the Nazi concentration camps, but as we'll hear in detail in our episode with Lawson Ichiro Sakai, Japanese American citizens were being interred here. And Jim Crow segregation laws didn't evaporate when African-Americans entered into the armed forces: for most of the war, troops were entirely segregated, with most black units led by white officers and many barriers delaying their advancement.

But "victory" was still the word during this time. We heard Frank Devita refer to Victory Mail in his episode. In East Jackson, Mississippi, the Food for Victory Association set up a fair in August of 1942 to educate civilians about how, as the local Jackson Advocate newspaper put it, "without the proper food, we cannot win the war." And a few months later, a letter from a reader published in another African-American newspaper, the Pittsburgh Courier, inspired citizens to fight a Double V campaign: a promise to actively support war efforts and encourage not only victory over fascism abroad, but also victory over racism at home. Those serving were to push and prevail, and those stateside were to keep pressure on politicians and to keep publishing.

George Hardy, a retired lieutenant colonel who started his career as one of the prestigious Tuskegee Airmen - the all African-American fighter pilot group - leads us into this Double V world today. Of the 1 million African-American men who served during World War 2, George is somewhat of an outlier. As we'll hear, most African-American troops were put into support positions like supply and those requiring manual labor. But George was a combat pilot. He doesn't mince words when it comes to some of the hardships he faced in his pursuit of higher rank. But, like many of his greatest generation, he does brush off some of this history, too. And you'll hear heavy silences as he reflects. And so now from his quiet home aside, a pond in Sarasota, Florida. Let's slow and sit and spend some time with George Hardy.

Veteran George Hardy: My name is George Hardy and I'm a retired lieutenant colonel, United States Air Force. However, in World War Two, I was in the army because it wasn't a separate air force at that time - I was a part of the United States Army Air Corps, and then United States Army Air Forces.

[Bluesy piano music comes in, along with the sound of children's voices playing and talking about their school day]

I was born in 1925. Philadelphia was divided in many areas. You had areas where African-Americans lived, areas where Italians lived, Irish and whatnot. Growing up on Reed Street in South Philly, I went to the Walter George Smith Elementary School. Now that school was an all Afro-American school: teachers, principal, everybody because it was right on the edge of a black area. Then I went to junior high school: predominantly white, mainly Italians. Then I went to South Philadelphia High School: 281 in my graduating class, only 4 were African-American. So you see how the race was divided in the city. There was racial tension, but I didn't feel it too much. I made several friends down there. One of my best friends was a Jewish kid and then a couple of Italian kids. But the only contact I with them was at school. Two separate lives, two separate friends; those friends at school and then those friends at home. And that's the way life was. But you get used to that after a while.

[sounds of dishes being washed, a woman's footsteps, and the chiming of an old clock]

There were seven of us in my family. I was next to the oldest. My older brother was born in 1923. My mother always, always at home. She did the cooking, she did the ironing, she did everything. My father, he'd work and he'd come home and my father was the disciplinarian, but my mother wasn't. What she would do most was, "Wait until your father comes home!" We got along very well, and I loved my father.

[sounds of wooden knobs turning, clock chimes, a woman's heels on a wood floor. Then, a door opening and a man's footsteps.]

I used to tinker with everything around the house and I would take things apart. And I remember I got the nice clock off the mantelpiece and got it behind a chair. My mother caught me. "Oh!

George, come here!" "Well, I'll put it back together!" "No, no, no. Leave it alone. Wait till your father gets home!" And I sweated for the rest of the day until he got home. "Eddie, come on. I'll show you what George did."

He looked at me. He shook his head. And he says, "You know, Alma. I think he's going to be an engineer." And he picked up the pieces and took them to the table sat down and while we put it together, he was talking to me. It was such wonderful, sitting with him. We were just good friends. At that moment, I decided I wanted to be an engineer. So when you talk to kids, you've got to be careful of what you say and how you say it because it may affect them. One little moment can make a difference in a child's life. No telling which will be the important point. And that changed my life. I did eventually get two graduate engineering degrees.

[a spoon against ceramic, sounds of soup slurping. Then a kettle boiling and water being poured into cups.]

My father was from Philadelphia. My father, now and then, would fix a special dish that I love: kidney stew, beef kidneys. And when he fixed that I loved to eat it, delicious. My mother was from the Bahamas. She's English and Spanish and some Indian. But she drank tea. So in our house, we didn't have coffee. we at tea? When I went in the service, for years, I never drank coffee. Before I went on a mission, I'd just drink a glass of water or a glass of milk and fly my mission.

[Bugle call to service]

My brother and two of his friends joined the Navy. My father was upset. Because of Afro-American background, the Navy could only accept them as mess attendants. And they made my brother cook on a small destroyer.

[Radio tuning in, a football game, and then the sounds of planes flying and explosions]

I remember December 7th, Sunday, I was upstairs doing my homework. And I had the radio on to the Eagles football game - didn't want my mother to hear it. They interrupted to mention that Pearl Harbor had been attacked. I didn't tell anybody about it because I wasn't supposed to be listening to radio in the first place. So my brother spent three and a half years out of the North Atlantic in that tin can. A lot of my classmates, some of them were over 18 so they joined the service: "Remember Pearl Harbor... Remember Pearl Harbor..."

I couldn't join 'cause I was still too young to go into service. But I wanted to be with my brother. I got that slip: if the parents signed for you, the Navy would take you at 17. Talked to my father, he shook his head and said, "No, I'm not gonna sign it, but let's talk about it." And we talked about it - that is, he did the talking. All I wanna do is be an engineer. I took science courses. I majored in math. And now to go around preparing food? He said, that's a real come down. And by the time he finished, I had no desire to go into the Navy as mess attendant. I realized he made sense. I loved listening to him.

[Slow piano version of Simple Gifts]

This country... It all came down from slavery. After the Civil War, the south, when they got their rights back, put into play segregation laws. And a lot of those people in the South were in the military. And so the military was segregated. And that's the way the country was. At that time, you travel through the South. Afro-America, you couldn't stay at hotels with whites or eat in any restaurants; they had a separate entrance for Afro-Americans in movie theaters. But it all boiled back to the fact that slavery was the basis of it. Slaves and then, now, people in the South didn't want to mix with them. Just the way the country was at that time.

No matter what it is, it's still our country. We wouldn't want Hitler over here. Or - geez - you'd think it'd be even worse, the Japanese! The way they treated the Chinese, it was awful. You know that if they came here, they would be after you, too, because you're different. And so the thing is, you wanted to fight for what you know rather than what you don't know. You're ready to fight for your country. Through all wars, we had Afro-Americans fighting for this country. Just the way life is, I guess.

[sounds of plane engines gearing up, the interior of a cockpit]

President Roosevelt, talking to the military about every American pilots, they assured him, "Well, we can't have Afro-American pilots because the service is segregated and all the flying squadrons are white." The president: "Well, why can't we have a black flying squadron?" So they prepared for a black flying squadron - 99th - and they've selected Tuskegee because Tuskegee had been involved in a civilian pilot training program to prepare pilots, because of what was happening in Europe. And so when they decided to do this, they felt that Tuskegee had the best program and good flying weather. And Tuskegee had to hire civilian instructors - black instructors - to train them to fly.

And now, I wanted to fly an airplane. The Battle of Britain: the fighter planes saved Britain! Germany was going to invade Britain, but they're going to soften it up with the Luftwaffe. The English were the first people to use radar. They were able to keep their fighter planes on the ground until the German planes got close enough. Then the fighter planes took off. And they had full fuel tanks. The Germans, flying from France, they have to go back before too long. The fighter pilots beat them back. And so the battle of Britain was won by the fighters. In June of '42, the Japanese were going to take the island of Midway and came with these four carriers. We ended up sinking all four of those carriers. So the air! That's, that's great, you know. As Churchill said...

Winston Churchill: "Never in the field of human conflict, was so much owed by so many to so few..."

Veteran George Hardy: And so I decided in 43 I wanted to fly.

March of '43 the Army and the Navy said, if you are seventeen and a high school graduate, you can take the exam for aviation cadet. And what did I do? I'm still thinking Navy. Passed the exam. And they realized who I was from my birth certificate and they failed me on my physical. Some problem with my wisdom teeth. I went to the dentist. He said, "There's nothing wrong with your teeth," he said, "they just don't want you." So then said, "Well, I'll go to the army." They sent me home until I turned 18, to report the 13th of July to active duty. I had orders to go to Keesler Army Airfield in Biloxi, Mississippi, for basic training. They put us on a train, three of us from Philadelphia. We were all going to Tuskegee.

Host: After the break...

Veteran George Hardy: And then the captain turned to the driver and said, "Where can he eat?", pointing to me.

Host: Stay with us.

COMMERCIAL

Host: Welcome back to Service: Stories of Hunger and War from iHeartRadio. I'm Jacqueline Raposo. And we're here with retired Lieutenant Colonel George Hardy. He's on a train leaving Philadelphia and en route to becoming a fighter pilot in the U.S. Army Air Corps.

[sounds of interior restaurant]

There's actually more to Corporal Trimmingham's train station story. Back at that cafe, two dozen guarded German POW's then sat in the dining room: eating, talking, smoking, having what appeared to be a swell time.

[Stephen Satterfield reading as Trimmingham]: "What is the Negro soldier fighting for?"...

Host: ...He then questioned in a letter to Yank military magazine.

[Stephen Satterfield reading as Trimmingham]: "Are we not American soldiers, sworn to fight for and die if need be for this, our country? Then why are they treated better than we are?"

Host: Rather than the specifics of what was in his K rations or base camp food, George is more apt to similarly recall the circumstances around which he was able to eat or not to eat. And as Trimmingham noted, whether or not you were included really matters when you're putting your life on the line for all of your fellow citizens and being asked to trust those around you with it. Let's continue with George's journey. Now, this isn't the first time we've boarded a train with a serviceman. Check out our first episode with Pat D'Ambrosio, and you might hear a difference in how they recount their experiences.

[sound of train over tracks, and steam whistle]

Veteran George Hardy: They gave us Pullman tickets, which surprised us, three privates. From Philadelphia, the B&L Railroad to Cincinnati. And that was really great! We were in a Pullman car and there were two berths on each side. So we had that section and the other people were in the rest of the car, most of them were white.

But then when we got to Cincinnati, they switched to L&N Railroad, and we still had Pullman tickets. And we were the only Afro-Americans in this car. So everything was fine except when we went to eat, to the dining car. Leaving Cincinnati, you go in through the south. And the laws in the south say white and coloreds must be separated as far as eating. So they had heavy curtain across with a few tables behind it for Afro-American. We had to go through to the dining car and sit behind the curtain. And the curtain was weighted so that if someone went through it would - [zipping noise] - close on the bottom. And that's where we had to eat when we went through the south until we got to Biloxi, Mississippi. But that's OK.

[airstrip sounds of plane engines, planes taking off and landing, etc. Then, a short whistle followed by marching and firing range pistol shots]

But we got to Keesler and then things got worse. Because once we got to Keesler Air Force base, we were absolutely segregated. We had our own barracks. We trained separately. We had a separate mess hall. We'd go to the firing range: whenever we were there, we were the only ones there; other times, whites would use it. And then went to Tuskegee in September, college trained detachment. We had some good instructors, Afro-American guys. They taught us and the PT-19, and that's what I flew in. It was just a lot of fun. I was still 18 when I learned to fly. I received my wings as a pilot and my commission as a second lieutenant.

[plane engine taking off]

And you know that racial problems keep... coming in here. I was selected to go to a gunnery meet out in Texas - they have a competition with the top gunners. Somehow, they picked me to go. And that was an experience I... I didn't like.

To go to the gunnery meet, we went out in two T-6s: a captain flew one and I rode in the backseat with him, and a lieutenant. Both of my white instructors. I'm the one in the contest, though. The first thing we do is went to a naval base at Lake Pontchartrain just outside New Orleans. Well, I knew the Navy was segregated. But Captain went ahead and I got to him and he said, "Well, he can sleep around there." I went and washed up and got dressed, put my uniform on, and went to the captain's door to find out what we're gonna do about eating because he's in charge. He wasn't there. I went down, I said, "You know where the captains....?" "Oh, he and the lieutenant, they went into New Orleans." They left me. Didn't even tell me where they were going. So I caught the bus, went into New Orleans, got something to eat and came back. The next day the meet went off and I didn't win anything. It was just... not a nice affair.

They wanted to go to Houston before they went back to Tuskegee. So we went to Ellington Field and landed there. I guess they realized what happened and the captain said, "I have a vehicle

that's gonna pick us up and take us into town. You can ride with us. And after we're dropped off, you can go to where you want to go."

[Jeep engine revving up, driving]

And we got in this vehicle - the driver, the captain, the lieutenant, and me - and they asked, "Where's the best steaks in town?" Hey said, "Well, you go to the Ship Ahoy, most people go there."

[Jazzy music, the sound of men laughing and talking, glasses clinking, a woman laughing, etc.]

So he took them there and then they pulled up in front of the Ship Ahoy; a lot of officers standing around. And then the captain turned to the driver and said, "Where can he eat?" - pointing to me. And the driver looked at me and said, "Right in there!" And the captain looked at the lieutenant and said, "Come on, let's go." So the three of us went in there. So I ate in that restaurant with them that night. Lot of dancing. And I was glad the lights were dark. But they had a good steak.

[planes flying, the sound of a mess hall.]

I went over in February 1945. As a 99th fighter squadron, 332nd fighter group, stationed at a base called Ramitelli. I just ate in the mess hall, everything they had. Whatever they had, I ate it. You had to have a good meal first thing, breakfast, and breakfast I would fill up on breakfast. I just ate anything I could get. Except that the military had powdered eggs and I hated those powdered eggs. I got a cigarette ration. I didn't smoke cigarettes. So I would take my cigarettes and trade them to the Italians for eggs - I forget how many eggs you could get for a pack of cigarettes. And I would take my eggs to the cook [sound of egg cracking and then frying] and ask him to fix my eggs sunny side up. And that's what I did for breakfast. I ate everything else they had, but I didn't like those powdered eggs.

[air field sounds]

If you look at the map of Italy, there's a spur out on the eastern side. We were just right at that point, that's where Ramitelli was. We took off to the east. By the time your gear came up, you out over the Adriatic. I flew a fighter airplane. Fighter airplane is a plane that has guns on it - the D models, we had six machine guns on it - only one person in the airplane, and so it's a fast airplane. And when you're flying the airplane, if you look straight ahead, you're looking through your gun sight and you aim your airplane. And you have your gun site up there, you just put the thing on the target, and the trigger's on your stick that you use a control the airplane. Every time you pull the trigger, the six guns would fire; three on each wing.

[planes firing, bombers dropping bombs, and engine exploding etc.]

Now the bomber airplanes, they carry bombs to bomb over Germany. And we had those groups in Italy. They would take off, get in formation, and fly at high altitude to drop bombs on factories and things on that end in Germany. And the Germans would send up fighters to shoot them down. We would escort the bombers to fight the German airplanes in the air - that was our job, to protect the bombers. So that was what I did. By the time I got over there, there weren't many German airplanes left. The only time I fired my guns was on strafing missions: sometimes on a short mission, after the bombers are safe you'd go back over Germany and look at targets of opportunity: trains, barges, or trucks on a highway. You'd want to make sure the Germans can't move equipment and stuff around. Oh, I'd love to shoot an engine because they tend to blow up.

But sometimes, the targets'd fire back at you so that you could see the shells coming back. You can't see them, actually, but the eyes tell you something is happening. It pumps up the adrenaline. And that's the reason they want to get younger people to do that. A guy 40 some years also, "Are you crazy? I'm not gonna go down there! There's guns down there!" But a guy 18, 19 years old? He's going down. The captain says, "Do this!" and you're going to turn in and go down and strafe people. Because the guy ahead of you said, "Let's hit it," and you follow him down and that's the way you learn. You don't have the fear of: "I can't do that." When you go to pilot training: "I can do anything."

[sounds of sawing, hammering etc. come in through the following]

I went over in February 1945. I flew 21 missions in March and April. And then war ended in May of '45. I got up to Milan and places like that. But the Italians didn't have the restaurants and things like that that they have today. So you didn't enjoy that much. Lots of people, they had very little. And a lot of them would come around to try to work to do things for you - that's how I got my eggs, people coming to barter things, they wanted to get cigarettes.

Remember, they fought a lot in Italy up the East Coast and it was tough fighting. The Germans destroyed a lot of stuff before they would give it up. The Italians had a real rebuilding job to recover from that. In World War One, other Germans didn't think they were really beaten. They felt they were betrayed by their leaders because they still had a full army and they surrendered. But in World War Two, they were completely devastated. And so, no more of that. And the Japanese? We weren't sure about invading Japan. We estimated we would lose at least half a million men because the Japanese wouldn't surrender on these islands. But once they were completely beaten? Now it's a different world. They've got to survive.

[Simple Gifts comes in again to the end]

I survive. My good lord pulled me through. So I survived. I can survive anything.

Host: We're leaving George mid-story.... He returned home from Italy and moved to New York to continue his education and be closer to his future wife, Beatrice, and they started what would be their family of four children.

But then, those many moving parts of the Double V campaign started coming together.

Trimmingham and Yank magazine received [hundreds of letters](#) in response expressing disgust and shame, and supporting Trimmingham's questioning of Democracy, and it was later considered a milestone for moving the cause forward.

Then, there were the accomplishments of African American troops abroad.

As a group, the Tuskegee Airmen flew 15,000 sorties over two years (sorties are short attack missions). They captured or destroyed 275 German planes, 1,000 trains or trucks, and a German destroyer. And the Germans only downed 25 of the group's bombers -- the next successful squadron had an equivalent average of 46 downed planes.

Then, the Army conducted a classified [survey of 250 white officers](#) and platoon sergeants who had served with black soldiers: 64% first admitted to initial skepticism about integration. But after having served together, 77% had a more favorable view. And while 69% said they performed the same as white troops, 17% said they performed even better than them.

Yet, from all branches of service, no African American World War 2 veterans were given the Medal of Honor. Until 1997. When 7 were. With only one - Vernon Baker - still alive to receive it.

Still, the Double V campaign triumphed when President Truman finally signed Executive Order 9981 into effect in 1948, desegregating the armed forces entirely, and George was recruited to return and help fortify the now independent Air Force.

He joined back up, soon flying combat missions on bombers in the Korean War and, as a 45-year old lieutenant colonel, he then flew in Vietnam. So, we're going to hear more from George in coming seasons.

There is so much about this landscape behind George's story that was omitted from our classroom history books. You can find some links to archival newspapers, photos, and more on Instagram and Facebook - we're @servicepodcast - and at George's page at servicepodcast.org. And you can hear more of George in our For the Mechanically Minded episode - a short primer on military production.

In our next episode, we board a ship with William Walker – Chief Petty Officer 1st class of the Navy. As William travels the Pacific, we'll incidentally hear more about the Double V campaign, from his ship's food holds, to the diner counter.

But before we go, I want to share one more clip. George was married to Beatrice for twenty-five years, and then to his second wife Bonnie for almost the same before she passed. Considering how our first six veterans this season are all widowers, I asked George how he keeps going after so much time fighting. It ends up, while the mess hall life wasn't for him all those years ago, it is food service now that helps to keep him in the light....

Veteran George Hardy: I work in a food pantry two days a week, serve up to 90 some people. I do what I can. I will help anybody, if someone needs help. Someone's got to do it. Just well be me.

Host: Service is a production of iHeartRadio and me. Our Supervising Producer is Gabrielle Collins; our Executive Producer Christopher Hassiotis. Stephen Satterfield voiced Corporel Trimmingham for us, and I urge you to check out Stephen's show - Point of Origin - right now on the iHeartRadio app or wherever you get your podcasts.

Thank you to Joe Faust of Tuskegee Airmen, Inc, for connecting us with George for this episode – I highly recommend you explore more at tuskegeeairmen.org.

And thank you to Mike at the Sarasota airport Hertz rental desk in Sarasota—he told me that when veterans come through, everyone in rentals comes out to stand in their appreciation, and I think these gestures of respect matter. Let's keep doing them, and talking about them.

Thank you for listening. And you, those who are serving and those who have served.