



War On Many Fronts 1 Written Video Transcript

[00:00.20.00] It's an honor to welcome you to this program on African-American veterans and post-traumatic stress disorder. The military has been good to my family and to me. But after a number [00:00.40.00] of years with the U.S. Coast Guard I've also seen the horrors of war and how they can destroy the life of soldiers, sailors, marines, airmen, coasties and their families. PTSD can occur in anyone regardless of color, race or ethnicity. It does not discriminate. [00:01.00.00] Since the beginning of this great nation African-Americans have sacrificed their lives in every war. And as you will see they have faced many wars, both on and off the battlefield. Many have faced a battle with PTSD. Some veterans experience their pain physically and [00:01.20.00] go to their primary care doctor. Others suffer depression or experience uncontrolled rage because they don't know how to handle the war within. Many veterans have suffered in silence, avoiding treatment, afraid to trust the system. You as treatment providers [00:01.40.00] are our veterans hope for getting help. We are counting on you to try to understand our heritage and our many battles and to treat us with the greatest respect. I'm confident that once you understand our story you will see each African-American veteran in a new light. [00:02.00.00] [00:02.20.00]

We owe a great deal to African-Americans. [00:02.40.00] Our freedom has been won by those not so free. Most African-Americans are descendents of African slaves brought here between the 1600s and 1800s. From the time of the earliest European settlements, African-Americans have played a major role. Despite their significant contributions [00:03.00.00] to society and to the military their bravery and loyalty has not always been recognized and appreciated. In times of war, African-Americans have been called to serve our country. During the Revolutionary War, African-Americans fought alongside Caucasian soldiers. Years later, in the Civil War [00:03.20.00] nearly 200,000 African-Americans from the North and South fought to free the slaves. During this period an insidious pattern emerged. In times of war African-Americans were called to serve but were excluded from bearing arms during more peaceful times when they were perceived to be a [00:03.40.00] political and economic threat.

And I don't think a history lesson is necessary but in the Constitution African-Americans were even referred to as being three-fifths of a human being, okay? But African-Americans have fought in every war [00:04.00.00] that the United States has been involved in. So, we have always been willing to put ourselves in harm's way to serve the United States of America. And I think all we're asking for is that we get the same back.

This pattern of inclusion and exclusion was to repeat itself [00:04.20.00] many times in our country's history. During times of inclusion another pattern became evident, the use of segregated units. And yet another pattern, African-Americans were often given little



training, the worst jobs, inadequate equipment and the most dangerous or gruesome combat situations or [00:04.40.00] not even allowed to fight. They frequently endured racially based incidents such as being passed over for promotions, verbal threats and at times physical aggression. In addition to this treatment in the military African-Americans also suffered racism at home.

I think the dilemma in many instances comes when [00:05.00.00] African-Americans come back and find that they still have to fight, struggle, advocate for rights that they feel that they've earned.

In 1917 there were more than 400,000 African-Americans in military service and many served in segregated units. [00:05.20.00] Many fought alongside the French in World War I and were so esteemed that 171 received the French Legion of Honor Medal. During World War II, the Tuskegee Airmen fought battles in Europe, Sicily and North Africa. They were led by Colonel Benjamin Davis, Jr., [00:05.40.00] who became the Air Force's first African-American general. An all-black unit called the Red Ball Express also became distinguished by their courage supplying troops fighting on enemy lines in Europe. But more often African-Americans soldiers were placed in segregated labor battalions.

The irony was, [00:06.00.00] for African-American vets, is they were often fighting for the freedoms of others abroad which they themselves did not experience at home. My father talks to me about German prisoners who were allowed to go into the Officer's Club when he was not allowed to go into the Officer's Club himself.

While serving our country [00:06.20.00] proudly for more than two hundred years African-American soldiers became increasingly more unwilling to accept or endure a segregated military. However, it was not until after World War II, in July of 1948, that President Harry Truman's executive order 9981 marked the end of segregated [00:06.40.00] and therefore inherently unequal military units in the United States.

There is no justifiable reason for discrimination because of ancestry or religion or race or color. [00:07.00.00]

Even with this bold step to end segregation and discrimination the proclamation took time, effort and courage to implement. In some cases African-American veterans still continue to fight, especially those with post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD. [00:07.20.00] African-American veterans with PTSD are still fighting a war on many fronts. We must keep in mind African-Americans' history as a people and our country's socio, political, economic system—a history of slavery, segregation, oppression, hostility and at times [00:07.40.00] violence have left their mark.

African-Americans have developed what some people call a healthy paranoia. That is they're guarded. People—they've either been prosecuted or persecuted or in some way damaged by their interactions with the quote "formal system".



The next front [00:08.00.00] is African-Americans' contribution to our military history and their battle for equal treatment.

Many of us feel, and it's been often said, that we were there at the beginning. I mean, you're in Boston, a town of significant history in America. The Boston Massacre of 1770, [00:08.20.00] the beginning of the American Revolution, all are tied with African-American history. African-Americans contributing to the greatness of this society.

One more front for many African-Americans is the added burden of having grown up in areas of great poverty. The high prevalence of crime and violence in these areas [00:08.40.00] can be traumatic for anyone. And for veterans PTSD symptoms could be triggered or exacerbated in these situations.

But here you're going into an environment where you have a homeless rate for African-American males which is very high. You have an environment which is frequently very hostile, so it's easily triggered.

You must also keep in mind each veteran's personal background, [00:09.00.00] his or her life history. For example, veterans may have suffered physical or sexual abuse prior to their military service and they compound PTSD. Other considerations include chronic medical problems, current life stressors, substance abuse issues and the veteran's support system. [00:09.20.00]

Just because the person is of a particular color, ethnic group, does not mean that they should be sort of grouped as a whole. That's a mistake.

A very important front is each veteran's military experiences, especially those that were stressful or traumatic. Additionally, African-Americans may have experienced [00:09.40.00] racially based stressors.

War is hell, hell, and the remnants of war sticks in your mind forever. It don't go away.

And the final front is each veteran's struggle to understand these most difficult experiences [00:10.00.00] and to manage their effects, each veteran's war within, PTSD.

Before my experience in Desert Storm I believe I would have been able to handle it and never have gotten in that situation. But afterwards I just I didn't have it in me to stop that situation. [00:10.20.00] And looking back now I can see what happened throughout those years and what just built up and built up and built up.

African-American veterans must be understood against this backdrop of war on many fronts. Post-traumatic stress disorder is a war many veterans experience. [00:10.40.00] In fact, PTSD is the third most common problem for our nation's veterans who access VA services. Studies on war stress and post-war adaptation for the National Vietnam



Veterans Readjustment Study found a disturbing trend. African-Americans suffer PTSD [00:11.00.00] at a significantly higher rate than Caucasians. What are the symptoms of PTSD? The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Fourth Edition and preceding editions describe the criteria. First, the individual must have experienced, witnessed [00:11.20.00] or have been confronted with an event that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury or threat to physical integrity of self or others and the individual's response involved intense fear, horror or helplessness. Second, the individual must also have [00:11.40.00] episodes of re-experiencing the event in ways such as intrusive memories of the traumatic event, repeated dreams of the trauma or physical reactions when exposed to reminders. A third criterion is avoidance, [00:12.00.00] such as efforts to avoid thoughts and feelings associated with trauma or efforts to avoid activities and places that are reminders of trauma. A fourth category or symptoms relates to increased arousal, for instance problems falling or staying asleep, problems concentrating or [00:12.20.00] excessive startle responses. And these symptoms need to occur for at least a month following the event. Extremely stressful or traumatic military experiences include walking point, firefights, being wounded, losing body parts or seeing a buddy [00:12.40.00] severely injured or dead. Other traumatic stressors can include grave registration duty, POW status, sexual assault and severe sexual harassment. However, not all stressful experiences meet the criteria for PTSD. Many veterans with PTSD [00:13.00.00] also suffer from psychiatric, behavioral and medical comorbidities. Despite these difficulties countless African-American veterans avoid treatment. When Aaron joined the Army during World War II it was [00:13.20.00] strictly segregated into black and white units. African-Americans were assigned most of the service jobs, as cooks, porters and stevedores.

Man, when you went to war you like to come back and tell your family you went to war, you know. You didn't go to load ships and unload ships and drive, you went to war. [00:13.40.00]

In World War II, Aaron was assigned to the Pacific theater and endured many limitations due to race. In that war Aaron's duty assignment was military police.

I couldn't arrest a white soldier no matter what he did. I had to call—sometime call a civilian police. But [00:14.00.00] you couldn't arrest him, you didn't have that authority. And I never could understand why if I had the training to do this, to apprehend somebody, why couldn't I do it?

Despite these setbacks duty remained the guiding force in Aaron's 31 year military career. [00:14.20.00] He says one of his worst moments in three wars came after World War II. African-American veterans confronted racism at home. Aaron recalls an incident on a bus.

There was some white guy, looked like they just drugged him off the street, went up to the bus driver and told him I was sitting too close to the front. [00:14.40.00] And the bus driver was pretty—very courteous though. He said, "I'm sorry, soldier, but we got a law



here you have to go all—you know, go back, all the way back to the back of the bus as far as you could go."

And if you were traveling by car on a highway in segregated 1940s [00:15.00.00] blacks were not allowed to use white restrooms.

I ask the guy one time [15:06] could my family use the bathroom. He said, "Did you read the sign out there?" I said, "Yes, it says white only." He says, "Well unless, unless you all can change colors in a hurry it won't do you any good." [00:15.20.00]

With the Korean War Aaron began to see changes in the treatment of African-Americans in the armed forces. At a time when blacks were making a more visible and pronounced fight toward ending segregation in America racial integration was actually beginning in the military. [00:15.40.00]

It was a tremendous change that more black Americans, black soldiers was getting promoted because they was promoted on their qualification and not on the recommendation from their commanding officer, not necessarily.

On the other hand [00:16.00.00] Aaron said the Officers' Clubs were kept separate and southern whites had a tendency to be more aggressive towards blacks. By the time of his participation in the Vietnam War, Aaron saw even greater opportunity for advancement.

That you had it, you could get promoted. The integration had worked [00:16.20.00] except in pockets. You know, always somebody who could keep pushing you down or something like that, had the authority to do it.

Yet it took Aaron more than 60 years to come to the VA for medical treatment and to seek help for his PTSD. Watching the Iraq War on TV [00:16.40.00] brought back military memories.

I experienced something in the last month that I never thought that would happen to me. I relive, I relive the Iraq War. [00:17.00.00] And I, I couldn't help it. It just, it didn't happen during the Gulf War. But I relived every, every day of it. And that's why I would encourage them to get, prepare yourself for this because eventually it will happen. [00:17.20.00] And suicide is not the answer. I can almost feel it coming. And sometime I would, I would tell them, you know, "I'm going in my room don't bother me." Sometimes would just like to just scream to the top of my voice [00:17.40.00] and if nobody home I do. And it and I know it really would—it's something that it's difficult to explain because your stomach start tightening. Then everything, all your muscles just start [00:18.00.00] tightening and tightening and tightening to feel like they're going to pop. I've always been a very personal, private [18:12] person. And a lot of things would hurt and would—I guess I learned from World War II how to suck it in and [00:18.20.00] it's the worst thing you can do. I guess I didn't want to admit that I really needed help. And I was going to do everything I could to keep from asking the government for help.



Aaron told his World War II buddies about participating [00:18.40.00] in this video and many said they would not have contributed.

Well, some of those guys really carried it, you know. And it's just built up and built up. And now they says, "They're not going to do anything for you, they never did do anything for you. So why bother with them then. I'd rather go on welfare than go to the VA." [00:19.00.00] Well I didn't look at it that way, I looked at I'm going to VA.

Aaron said he's proud to have served his country for 31 years and will do anything for a vet no matter what color.

I'm an American who was born black. [00:19.20.00] So, I guess that make me a Black American. So I, I do not under any circumstances consider I'm an African-American. I am an American.

[end of audio]

