

THE IMPERIAL VERSION OF HISTORY

# Buried Narratives

SOME HEROES TAKE A CENTURY TO EMERGE



*“Easter morning, T/5 William E. Thomas and Pfc. Joseph Jackson.” March 10, 1945. 1st Lt. John D. Moore.*



*Graphic: San Francisco Chronicle*

An historian named Dominic Capra writes that it takes a century for the full truth to come out. A battle, an election, a book – it sometimes takes the passage of time (a *lot* of time) for us to understand the real stories. This is partly because we see what we want to see, or what we are conditioned to see.

This general idea is illustrated by a specific episode involving Lieutenant John Fox.

were shunned by their own country)”. Here is how Frank Viviano begins his account of this buried story and how it was uncovered:

When a massive German assault was launched on this windswept mountain village in December 1944, a scant two platoons of American infantrymen were dug in here. Their own commanding officers expected them to throw down their guns and run.

But for 20 critical hours, the tiny complement of 70 GIs -- all of them black, from the U.S. Army's segregated 92nd Infantry Division -- held out against an offensive that might have changed the course of World War II.

Then they vanished, almost completely, from the war's official records.

It has taken five decades of stubborn efforts by the battle's few survivors, and 20 years of research by a Bay Area woman who accidentally stumbled onto their tale, to fill in the empty page in that history.

In every war, there is a ratio of personnel to combat personnel: in World War II, it was 8:1. That is, for every eight people in the military, one actually fired a weapon. The rest were support (ditch diggers, truck drivers, laundrymen, chefs, etc.) or administrative. Because black soldiers in World War II were viewed not quite as “full” soldiers, they mostly served in support roles. Very few black soldiers got to actually fire a weapon: John Fox was one.

Here is how they were greeted when they arrived in Italy to fight the Nazis:

“I did not send for you,” Gen. Edmund Almond, the white commandant of the 92nd Division told his African American junior officers after their disembarkation in Italy. “Your Negro newspapers, Negro politicians and white friends have insisted on your seeing

combat, and I shall see that you get combat and your share of casualties.”

Ouch. Is it any wonder that zero Medals of Honor were awarded to black soldiers for World War II? It was only thirty years later that this oversight was corrected.

Just under 1 million black soldiers served in World War II. Among those who saw combat, nearly a quarter were killed or wounded. They captured twice as many enemy troops as their own numbers.

Yet when the official books were closed on the war effort, not a single African American had been presented with the Congressional Medal of Honor, the nation's highest commendation for valor. Black soldiers, the conventional wisdom ran, had "melted away" during major offensives.

The phrase came from an offhand remark in 1945 by Truman Gibson, the War Department's special assistant on Negro Affairs. For half a century, his words were the standard assessment of African American military performance in World War II.

John A. Fox was awarded his Medal of Honor in 1972, twenty-seven years after his heroic deed. Spike Lee made a 2005 film, *Miracle at Santa Anna*, loosely based on the incident.

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