

Hosea Williams

Hosea Williams known as “a battering ram for the movement,” was a skilled protest organizer. Born on January 5, 1926, in Attapulgus, Georgia, Williams faced early challenges as his mother passed away, leaving him to be raised by his grandparents. During World War II, Williams joined the Army and reached the rank of staff sergeant in an all-Black unit. His unit was bombed by Nazis, and he was the only one who survived. He had to spend a whole year in a hospital in Europe to recover from his injuries. For his bravery and sacrifice, he received a Purple Heart, which is a special honor given to those wounded or killed in service. However, he ended up with a permanent limp from his injuries. After being injured and recovering in a British hospital, he completed high school, obtained a bachelor's degree from Morris Brown College, and a master's degree from Atlanta University.

Williams became involved with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in Savannah, where he gave speeches against segregation. By 1960, he was the president of the Southeastern Georgia Crusade for Voters, a Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) affiliate. Martin Luther King, Jr., recommended Williams for the SCLC executive board, and Williams joined in 1962. When he faced obstacles within the NAACP, King supported him.

Williams later became SCLC's director of voter registration. In Selma, Alabama, he played a crucial role in the Selma to Montgomery March, where he withstood many beatings. Following King's assassination in 1968, Williams became SCLC's executive director until 1979. He later pursued a political career, serving in the Georgia General Assembly and on the Atlanta City Council and DeKalb County commission. Williams led a significant civil rights march in Forsyth County in 1987. He passed away in 2000 from cancer.

Medgar Evers

Medgar Evers was born in Decatur, Mississippi, during the time of Jim Crow. Evers excelled in school despite the segregation that limited resources for Black students. He had to walk miles to school and endured racial insults and mistreatment from white students on riding on buses. In his early years, Evers' family friend was lynched, and his clothes were displayed on a fence for months to teach a lesson to his community.

At the age of 17, Evers enlisted in the US Army during World War II. He served in a segregated unit and experienced the mistreatment of Black troops. After the war, he returned home with many medals for his service.

Evers enrolled at Alcorn Agriculture and Mechanical College. He excelled in academics, became involved in various activities, and graduated with honors. He married his college classmate and fought for civil rights in Mississippi, leading boycotts and applying to the University of Mississippi's law school. It was his rejection from this law school that caused him to further his work with the NAACP.

Evers joined the NAACP as a field secretary, leading investigations into racially motivated murders, including the Emmett Till case. He played a crucial role in James Meredith's enrollment at the University of Mississippi, which helped desegregate the institution, that Evers was denied admission to years before.

Medgar Evers was murdered by white supremacist for his activism work in May 1963. He was shot on his front porch while his wife and young children were inside. His death raised public awareness of civil rights issues and influenced the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Evers' contributions to the movement continue to be honored through various monuments, memorials, and institutions.

Sergeant James Neely

Private James Neely served in the 25th Infantry, which was an all-black regiment that recently returned from serving in the Spanish-American War in Cuba. On August 19, 1898, Private Neely had a day pass, and he visited Hampton, a small town in Georgia. Wearing his blue uniform, he entered a drug store and asked for a soda at the counter. However, the white owner told him that Black customers had to order and drink outside at the back of the store.

Private Neely didn't think it was fair and spoke up. An altercation ensued between Private Neely and the owner, and Private Neely was thrown out onto the street. The commotion attracted a crowd of armed white men who chased Private Neely down the road, shooting at him. Private Neely was later found dead from gunshot wounds.

A local coroner's jury quickly said that the murder was committed by unknown people. Army officials didn't respond immediately or arrange to bring Private Neely's body back. This incident showed the challenges and prejudice faced by Black Americans during that time.

A Black Woman in the WAC (Women's Army Corps)

During World War II, over 140,000 women served in the Women's Army Corps, and about 6,500 of them were Black. In late 1944, the Army formed the 6888th, a unit of about 850 Black women. They were led by Army Maj. Charity Adams, who became the highest-ranking Black woman during the war.

Although the 6888th did not go to the frontline, they still went through weeks of basic training, which included obstacle courses and gas mask drills. They studied enemy aircraft, ships, and weapons, and went on long marches with heavy backpacks. In February 1945, the unit was sent to England, and upon arrival, their mission was to sort and deliver a massive backlog of mail to boost morale among deployed U.S. forces. Many soldiers had not received mail for months. The women worked tirelessly in three shifts, twenty-four hours a day, sorting, redirecting, and delivering the mail. They also managed their own supply room, motor pool, and mess hall.

Their job was not easy. They faced challenges like piles of mail reaching the warehouse ceilings and packages spoiled by rats. They had to deal with incomplete addresses, recipients with the same names, and the constant movement of service members. They worked for 30 days on each piece of mail, and if they could not locate the recipient, the mail was marked as undeliverable.

In Birmingham, England, the 6888th cleared what was thought to be a six-month backlog in just half the time. In France, they accomplished a similar feat. The women received praise for their work, but they also faced discrimination due to their race and gender. Despite the challenges, they were finally honored for their wartime service in later years.

Josephine Baker

Josephine Baker, an entertainer known for her performances and fame, had a lesser-known role as a fighter against Fascism during World War II. Born in East St. Louis in 1906, she faced racial discrimination in the United States and later became a French citizen. When France fell to the Nazis, Josephine joined the French Resistance as a spy, using her celebrity status to gather information.

In her early years, Josephine entertained and danced for neighborhood children. At 19, she accepted an offer to perform in Paris, where racial segregation was not as prevalent as in the US. She quickly became a rising star with her provocative dancing and gained fame as an entertainer. Josephine's success made her one of the wealthiest black women at that time.

During a European tour in 1928, Josephine encountered the rising political unrest fueled by Hitler's ideologies. She faced discrimination and protests against her performances. World War II put a pause on her career, and she married her third husband, Jean Lion. Her interracial marriage and defiance of societal norms made her a target for the Nazis.

As the Germans advanced on Paris, Josephine fled to a rented chateau in the south of France. There, she sheltered refugees and came into contact with French counter-military intelligence. She was recruited as a spy due to her celebrity status and connections. Josephine collected information on German troop movements and harbors while attending parties and diplomatic functions.

Her estate was visited by the Nazis, but Josephine charmed them and escaped suspicion. Recognizing the danger, she left France with classified documents hidden in invisible ink on her sheet music. After D-Day and the liberation of Paris, she returned wearing a military uniform and witnessed the hardships faced by the people. Josephine sold her valuables to help provide food and coal to the needy.

In recognition of her bravery, General de Gaulle awarded Josephine the Croix de Guerre, Rosette de la Résistance, and named her a Chevalier de Légion d'honneur. Josephine Baker transcended her role as an entertainer and used her voice to challenge oppression and fight against the Nazis. Her legacy serves as an inspiration of resilience and resistance in the face of adversity.