BLACK SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISTS
AND MILITARY SERVICE

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Introduction

This topic is germane for several reasons. First, it’s a neglected area of research. Many people assume that Black SDA military personnel have done little worthy of serious historical consideration. Second, this subject recognizes the position of noncombatant military participation, which is preferred by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Third, it gives overdue recognition to those who have given so much. Like the forgotten deeds of Mordecai in the days of Esther, which became a catalyst for the liberation of the Jewish people, the deeds of Black SDA military personnel have the potential of serving as a catalyst for modern African-Americans, who continue to reach back to name and claim their heritage.

As a Black SDA military officer with 19 years of service in the U.S. Navy I have witnessed firsthand the superb efforts of many of these individuals and am happy to provide an insider’s perspective that casts light on the career of these individuals who served their country with honor and dedication.

As Blacks we applaud the sacrifices and commitment to service of such African-Americans as Gen. Colin Powell, Gen. Daniel “Chappie” James, and Jesse Brown, Vietnam veteran and first Black secretary of veterans’ affairs. Many are familiar with the name Benjamin O. Davis, Sr., the first African-American to achieve the rank of brigadier general in the regular armed forces. A few may even know about the superb work of Samuel L. Gravely, Jr., the first Black admiral in the Navy. Some may have heard about the accomplishments of the Tuskegee airmen, an all-Black Army air corps flying unit that had many noteworthy achievements in combat against the Germans in World War II.

Few people would include on their list names of Seventh-day Adventist African-Americans who have made military contributions, for that is a long and distinguished list. Joseph Powell, Leonard Johnson, Herman Kibble, James North, Helena Dyson, Donna Phillips, Donald Walker, Terrence Simmons, Michael Dyson, Anthony Phillips, J. Paul Monk, Meretle Wilson, David Yates, and Gerald Jones, along with many others, have contributed to the strength of America through patriotic military service.

Like the saints who served in Caesar’s household during the time of the early church, these persons have wielded a potent influence in the armed forces household. They have kept alive the knowledge of the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s unique historical involvement with the U.S. military, they have been resource persons for the church in the interaction with the government of its military units, and they have broken down stereotypes and paved the way for other Black and White SDAs to receive positions of greater responsibility.

Black SDAs have also made major contributions in the medical field and in military chaplaincy services. Adventist chaplains have been instrumental in sensitizing the armed forces to the unique spiritual needs of SDA personnel. They have also intervened to help extricate SDA military personnel, both Black and White, from potentially career-ending impasses related to Sabbath observance. They have made contributions in the areas of writing, evangelism, pioneering service, and training. These unsung heroes deserve their footnote on the pages of history.

Chaplaincy Functions

Black SDA chaplains have been particularly active in our military history. They have helped to preserve the free exercise rights of all personnel, but Seventh-day Adventist service members in particular. The free exercise clause includes the freedom to worship in the manner one chooses. The nature of military service, however, sometimes makes this difficult. Personnel are often ordered on short notice to “hot spots” abroad, and in the process they may be denied the usual opportunities for regular worship. However, even under these circumstances military personnel can avail themselves of the services of a chaplain who will help ensure that their spiritual needs are met. When the chaplain is unable to meet their needs by himself or herself, referrals are appropriate and desired.

Through the years Black SDA military chaplains have played an important role in assisting Adventist personnel in their requests, but have gladly represented individuals of all denominations in this regard. When faced with a religious accommodation matter, most commanding officers need advice. And whether the issue involves a Christian Science practitioner, or a member of the wiccan faith, or someone from the Islamic tradition, Black SDA chaplains have stood by their plaintiff, ensuring that before religious accommodation deci-
sions are made, commanding officers consider such factors as unit cohesion, good order and discipline, the sincerity of the requestor, and the importance of the religious requirement.

Unfortunately, many non-SDA chaplains have limited familiarity with the teachings of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. As a result, commanding officers have been given incorrect advice regarding requests from Seventh-day Adventists. Non-SDA chaplains and the military establishment often assume that SDAs keep Sabbath in the same way that other Protestants keep their day of worship. They expect that if an hour or two is given to attend church services, the needs of the SDA serviceperson have been met. They are unaware that SDAs cease from secular labors from sunset Friday until sunset Saturday. Black SDA military chaplains have been invaluable in correcting misperceptions and thereby salvaging the careers of thousands of SDA servicepersons.

Particularly significant are the religious services rendered by Black SDA chaplains for units that are stationed outside the United States. Here Black and White military personnel who are accustomed to a more celebrative style of worship find themselves drawn to the non-European approaches to worship employed by Black SDA military chaplains. Many SDA personnel on ships have had to wait until they reached the next port to attend an SDA worship service. And when there they’ve often found it necessary to worship where English was not spoken. Fortunately, enough Black SDA military chaplains deploy on ships or are stationed overseas to meet these important spiritual needs.

Early in their history SDAs grappled with the question of involvement in military service. While some advocated pacifism, the church eventually moved in the direction of noncombatancy. This enabled full cooperation with the government within all reasonable limits. Noncombatancy permitted SDAs to express their patriotism by serving in the military while avoiding the taking of human life, using instead the vehicle of medical and paramedical activities. This noncombatant philosophy was solidified by World War I.

When military people have inquired about what Seventhday Adventists believe regarding involvement in combat, Black SDA chaplains and other personnel have been in a position to set the record straight. This has helped to remove negative stereotypes and provide a correct picture of the historical development of the SDA position of noncombatancy.

Under Fire

The first Black SDA chaplain was Joseph T. Powell, who entered the U.S. Army as a chaplain on November 26, 1960. Chaplain Powell served during the turbulent days of the civil rights movement, when tensions were high within and without the military. He also served in Vietnam, bringing a sense of Christ’s love to personnel confronted with the horrors of war.

Black SDAs who followed in military chaplaincy, serving in the Navy and Air Force, include James North, J. Paul Monk, David Yates, Meretle Wilson, Herman Kibble, Milo Allison, Charles Robinson, Ron Walker, Tiffany Hardy, and the writer.

Long before annual Black History Week celebrations were popular, Black SDA military personnel served as resource persons to provide information to their White colleagues about the contributions of Black Americans in military history. What they transmitted, to the surprise of many, is that Blacks have given their blood in every war this nation has fought.

During the Revolutionary War the list of battlefields on which Blacks fought included Lexington, Concord, Ticonderoga, Bunker Hill, Long Island, Trenton, Princeton, Bennington, and many others critical to that conflict. According to John Hope Franklin, in his book From Slavery to Freedom, 38,000 Blacks lost their lives in both the Revolutionary War and the Civil War. The mortality rate of Black soldiers was 40 percent higher than that of White troops.

Blacks also gave valiant service in World Wars I and II and the Korean conflict. They did so pointing out with bold gratitude and sorrow that these contributions were made by men and women who were often subjected to racial segregation and discrimination at home. And while Black Americans comprised only 15 percent of the total armed forces present in Vietnam, 22.4 percent of all Army troops killed in action were African-American.

More recently Black SDA servicepersons have been prepared to remind their counterparts of the African-American contributions made during Operation Desert Storm in the Persian Gulf and Operation Uphold Democracy in Haiti. Blacks, who make up 12 percent of the U.S. population, made up 24.5 percent of military personnel deployed to the Gulf. In the Haiti operation, Blacks were also disproportionately represented. African-Americans have done more than their fair share, and they deserve our gratitude for serving and our assurance that Black and White Americans will note their sacrifice.

With Pen as Well

One of the unique contributions of Black SDA military personnel has been in the area of journalism. J. Paul Monk, a writer of considerable talent, later became the editor of Message magazine, the leading SDA African-American religious journal. James North, SDA Air Force chaplain, authored a particularly influential article entitled “The Chaplain and Equal Opportunity.” The article made such an impact that it was later published in the Joint Command Magazine and has effected improved race relations throughout the military.
Among other notable contributors is Herman Kibble, Black SDA Navy chaplain, who wrote as a doctoral project the paper entitled “Enhancing Philippine Identity Amid Cross-cultural Loyalties.” This paper has assisted many Navy chaplains in providing more effective ministry to Philippine military people and their families.

Through the effective use of writing, Black SDA military personnel have made a difference, influencing attitudes, enlightening minds, removing stereotypes, and presenting the gospel with the flavor and perfection of the eschatological emphasis of the third angel.

Training Others

A number of Black SDAs have been involved in the world of military training. Among them are James North, the first Adventist to teach at the Air Force Chaplain School and the first officer under the rank of major to be given that assignment; Anthony Phillips, a major in the United States Army and a professor of military science in Savannah, Georgia, who makes the Advent message appealing by his words and life; and J. Paul Monk, who as an Army chaplain established traditional Black worship style chapels that served as a model for other chaplains in ministering effectively to the spiritual needs of Black personnel. (Monk’s model has since been adopted by all the armed services. Before Monk, African-Americans of all faiths were forced to worship in settings with a European style of praise.)

Since 1991 it has been my privilege to serve at the U.S. Naval Academy as assistant director of training for the Navy Chaplain Corps, where my obligation is to help train chaplains to care for the spiritual needs of our military personnel around the world. That this prestigious position in the military training world is occupied by an SDA Black is evidence of the high esteem in which the military holds SDA servicepersons.

As part of their philosophy of military training, Black SDA military people have conducted five-day smoking-cessation programs, helping hundreds defeat their addiction to nicotine. In the area of training they have made a difference.

Effective Witness

Thousands of persons have been baptized into the Seventh-day Adventist Church because of the labors of Black SDA military people. These baptisms came not only because of the work of chaplains but also because of the courageous stand for principles made by many Black SDA soldiers and sailors.

When Capt. Donald Walker decided to give up a 10-year Army career rather than break the Sabbath, one incredulous officer asked him, “You mean you’re going to give up the opportunity for a 30-year career because of a single day?” Walker did resign, but was never unemployed. The day after he left the Army he was hired by Pine Forge Academy and launched into a fruitful career in the SDA denomination.

Walker’s witness during the late fifties and early sixties is illustrative of the will and courage exercised by faithful military personnel—both volunteers and enlisted, officers and ordinary troops—through the decades. His stand for right and that of a multitude of others has spoken well of SDAs in the military, while providing an effective witness by which multitudes have been led to Christ.

Early Contributions

Ironically, African-American SDA military personnel have done much to pave the way for White SDA servicepersons to experience improved conditions in the military. Because of the government’s insistence on fairness, Herman Kibble became the first SDA chaplain in any service to earn the rank of O-6, the equivalent of colonel. He was also the first SDA to serve on an aircraft carrier. Before Kibble was assigned to a carrier, many thought SDAs were too provincial for such an assignment. After Kibble paved the way, a White SDA chaplain was assigned duty aboard an aircraft carrier.

As has been mentioned, African-American SDAs have served trailblazing appointments at the Air Force Chaplain School, the Naval Academy, and the Atlantic Fleet Chaplain Department. Doors opened by these pioneers have permitted many others to follow. A few weeks after Kibble was promoted to 0-6, a White SDA was similarly promoted. Clearly because of the sterling performance of its Black SDA military pioneers, the Adventist Church is more favorably viewed by the defense establishment.

Medical and Dental Work

As might be expected, the medical field is one in which SDAs have flourished. In fact, one SDA Army medic, Desmond Doss, won the Congressional Medal of Honor. In this vital area scores of African-American SDA physicians and nurses have made and are making a vital difference. One of the most celebrated Black SDA military physicians, Leonard Johnson, achieved the rank of full colonel in 12 years, becoming at the time the second-youngest colonel in the United States Air Force Medical Corps.

Johnson also earned a master’s degree in public health from Harvard University and was the first Black physician to become certified in the specialty of aerospace medicine through residency training. He also held the aeronautical rating of chief flight surgeon, the highest flying rating for a physician. Black SDAs have made their mark in the military medical field.

SDA African American military personnel have also contributed in the dental field. Major Donna Phillips is one example of the excellence of SDA African-American den-
Phillips, a dentist at an Army base in Savannah, Georgia, seeks always to witness to those who inquire about her faith. She has served her church as a Pathfinder leader, Adventist Youth leader, health and temperance leader, school and church board member, and usher board member. Like so many other Black SDA military personnel, Phillips shares her special dental knowledge in the civilian sector, edifying the body of Christ and empowering God’s people to prosper and be in health.

While most Americans have heard of Gen. Colin Powell, few have heard of the faithful servants of God and country whom we have mentioned. But these persons and their colleagues have left indelible footprints in military history. They have made rich contributions in counseling, lobbying, advocacy, writing, training, teaching, evangelism, medicine, and witness in general. Pioneering and persevering, they have fought “the good fight of faith” and are worthy of our gratitude.

2 Ibid., p. 510.