

# MINORITIES: War Made Racism Harder to Swallow

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Some World War II veterans faced another battle when they returned home — against racism.

“In France they treated me with respect,” Leo Peoples of Omaha said. “When I got back here I got treated like a dog.”

Peoples, 70, is black. Drafted in 1943, he served in the Army medical corps, driving amphibious trucks.

More than 3,300 people of color from Nebraska and Iowa served in the armed forces during World War II.

The armed forces segregated blacks but integrated American Indians, Asians and Hispanics. Integration of blacks in the armed forces did not come until 1948.

For many blacks who lived in integrated areas, military segregation was a blow to their dignity. For some from the Midwest, it was the first time in their lives they had been segregated.

Albert G. Tibbs, 73, of Omaha remembers growing up as one of seven blacks in the college town of Grinnell, Iowa. He said he had never faced segregation before being sent to an all-black unit at McGill Field in St. Louis in 1943.

After the war, Tibbs went back to Iowa, but his experience with segrega-

tion wasn't over. In 1956, Tibbs and his family moved to Omaha, where he was refused membership in the VFW because he was black, he said. Tibbs instead joined American Legion Post 30 at 1817 N. 33rd St., where he became post commander.

Native Americans were exempt from the draft in World War II, but 122 from Iowa and 201 from Nebraska enlisted.

Isac Caremoney, 76, a Winnebago who lives in Macy, was in the Army during World War II. “Sometimes I would ask myself, ‘Why did I go, what am I fighting for?’ ” Caremoney said.

After he got back from the war, Caremoney said, many of the freedoms he fought to defend were not always given to American Indians.

Ben Kuroki, a native of Hershey and a Japanese-American, went to North Platte to enlist in the Army the day after Pearl Harbor was bombed, he said, but was given the runaround.

Undaunted, Kuroki went to Grand Island and was accepted by the Army Air Corps. Kuroki flew more than 30 bombing missions in Europe and North Africa. After his tour of duty in Europe, he wanted to join the fight against Japan.

With the help of Sen. Carl Curtis,  
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R-Neb., Kuroki went to war against Japan as a B-29 turret gunner. He was the only Japanese-American to bomb the Japanese mainland during World War II.

When the war ended, Caremony took a job in a Sioux City packinghouse, and Kuroki enrolled in the University of Nebraska at Lincoln. All veterans received the benefits of the GI Bill of Rights. But the training did not guarantee jobs, and some minorities had difficulty obtaining work.

Paul Marquez, a South Omaha native and Navy veteran, used the GI Bill to learn upholstery. He got a job in an Omaha shop but quit after a few days. Marquez, a Hispanic, said his boss continually yelled and tried to

intimidate him, forcing him to quit.

"Prejudice was very flagrant back then," said Marquez, who now lives in Omaha. "It still is. Prejudice is just like war. It never stops."

Marquez took a job at the Swift and Co. packinghouse in South Omaha instead.

"During the war there was a labor shortage, and many blacks were able to get jobs that they couldn't have before," said Bill Pratt, University of Nebraska at Omaha history professor.

But after the war, when the labor shortage was over and many white veterans returned to their old jobs, minorities once again had trouble getting hired, Pratt said.

Some minority veterans refused to go back to the old system.

"Black servicemen came home, and

a lot of them were not willing to have the old situation re-established," Pratt said. "They fought for democracy overseas. Now they wanted to see that there was democracy at home."

In November 1947 a group of Creighton University students formed the DePorres Club to attack job bias. The club was named after Martin DePorres, a black man who had been blessed by the Catholic Church for his work with the oppressed and the poor in Peru.

"The war propaganda was still pretty fresh in our minds — that all people are created equal," said Dennis Holland, 68, a founding member of the club.

"Omaha was pretty much a Jim Crow place in those days," Holland said. "It just didn't have the signs up like the South did."

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