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## **Benjamin O. Davis Jr. Collection - Correspondence, undated**

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[[preprinted]]To[[/preprinted]]  
LT. COL. BENJAMIN O. DAVIS, JR.  
HQ. 332d FIGHTER GROUP  
A.P.O. 650 90PM  
N.Y., N.Y.

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Pg.1  
THE BOY WHO WASN'T SURE:  
Benjamin Oliver Davis, Jr.  
^[[ARNA BONTEMPS]]

Youn Ben Davis was unhappy at the University of Chicago. Not that this University wasn't fine one, of course, and not that the boy was unable to cope with the mathematics and science courses in which he was enrolled- it was neither of these. And it was not that Ben lacked friends and pleasant associations. Of these he had a great many of them in Chicago. Something much different troubled this ~~[[strikethrough]]sophomore[[/strikethrough]]~~ ^[[JUNIOR-SENIOR]]. something deeper- something inside himself. Ben was unhappy because he was puzzled. The time had come for him to decide what he would make of himself as a man, and Ben was stumped. He couldn't answer.

To some the question may sound easy, but to young Ben it was more than a notion. It meant more than just turning a few ossibilities over in his head and selecting one. To him the question was more like a complicated algebraic statement with odd factors and strange combinations on each side of the equation. And while the problem remained unsolved, Benjamin Oliver Davis, Jr., felt troubled in mind. He couldn't work up much interest in anything else.

Ben Davis had been born in Washington, D.C., on December 18, 1912. A few months before his eighth birthday his parents had carried him to Alabama where his father, then a lieutenant colonel in the United States Army, had been assigned professor of military science and tactics at



Tuskegee Institute, the well known industrial and vocational school. Four years later the family made another move, thistime to Cleveland, his father having been made an instructor of infantry in the Ohio National Guard. In the six years that followedBen completed elementary school, graduated from Central High, did his Freshman year at Western Reserve and grew into as lith and straight a figure as any six foot ~~four~~ <sup>^</sup>~~two~~ inch giant on any campus anywhere.

Then came Chicago and the year of indecision. What would he be? What could he be?

Well, to answer the last one first, he could have been a doctor, a dentist, a teacher, a lawyer, a preacher- that last one made Ben smile. Nobody would ever put any wings on his shoulders, he sometimes said laughingly. He was no angel, and he felt quite sure he wasnot cut out for a pupit. Neither was he inclined toward medicine or denistry, law or thew teaching profession. All of these were good and honorable goals at which to aspire, but somehow Ben Davis felt that they were not for him. His own mind ran toward-

But was the use of saying it? The Army offered no future to a colored boy, not even to one with the commanding dignity, the easy poise, the bright mind of young Ben. Everybody knew that and the Davis family better than anybody. There were a couple of regiments of colored cavalry, of course, the old

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Pg2

Ninth and Tenth which had marched to glory with Teddy Roosevelt at San Juan Hill during the Spanish American War, but a young college nam, the son of an army colonel and a well-educated mother, would find little satisfaction in an outfit which offered no prospects for advancement. The officers of the U.S. Army were generally produced at West Point and similar schools( except, perhaps, during a war), and everybody knew there hadn't been a colored graduate at the Military Academy in fifty years. One or two had been appointed, of course by congressmen who thought it no more than fair to do so, but the result was always the same. The colored boys would soon drop out. The general public never seemed quite sure just why, and nobody expected a change in that situation. Customs get fixed by long habit, and habits are hard to break. What's more, there was no sign of a war back in 1930.

The exceptional case of Ben's own father was no encouragement to a boy about to make a start in his life's work. The elder Davis was promoted to the rank of full colonel in 1930, following a long career of military service in the war with Spain, in the occupation of the Philippine Islands and at army posts in the United States. It had been a slow pull up through the ranks. Even so, there were no indications that he could have accomplished it had he not made a start during wartime. Colonel Davis' advancement rank had, up to the time young Ben was a sophomore at the University of Chicago, been half the result of an accident, half the result of slow plodding.

Ben Davis, the younger, counted on no such accidents, and he was never in a mood for slow plodding. In his nature there was as much of Mercury as of Mars. He couldn't be happy while mooning in uncertainty. He had to know his objective. He required some knowledge of how that goal was to be reached. Given that much however, he would ask no special favors. The Army, as the outlook appeared to him in 1930, promised a colored youth less than the minimum that any boy has a right to ask on entering a career. But suddenly something happened. Ben Davis, the slender uncertain sophomore, the perplexed but easygoing math major at the University of Chicago, was offered an appointment to the United States Military Academy at West Point.

The forces that brought about this appointment were part of the general evolution of the nation, no doubt, but the younger Davis was not then, nor is he now, one to question too closely the causes behind surprising developments. What he saw in the appointment was simply a crack in the wall that had hedged him about and depressed his spirit. But now the wall was weakening. A little help from him, and it might fall. The idea thrilled him. He bounced out of his former mood so suddenly he almost convinced himself that Mercury had actually put wings on his feet.

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The first hurdle was the entrance examination. One doesn't enter the United States Military Academy by appointment alone. The tests to which its entrants are subjected, both physical and mental, are most rigid. Yet it must be honestly said that Ben did not give these tests serious thought in the spring of 1931. At first he was too excited over the unexpected appointment. Later his feeling became quite different.

Years of denial and restriction sometimes leave mark~~[[/del]]a~~[[/del]]s~~ on people, even people as young and eager as Ben Davis, sophomore. A boy who has been allowed to feel that he hasn't a fair chance in life is likely to ask why, and the answer - if it is not a good one - may leave him bitter. Perhaps the first slight beginnings of such a feeling had come into Ben's mind. He has never said so, but it is a fact that he went to his examination in an indifferent, sceptical mood~~[[/del]]n~~[[/del]]d~~. His first joy had vanished. He frankly doubted that he would be permitted to attend the military Academy at West Point, even though he met all the requirements. People kept telling Ben what had happened to the last colored boy who made the attempt, and the way they told it made the outlook seem very discouraging indeed. That had been no more than a year ago, and the young cadet in question had been dropped because of a failure in mathematics. The people who talked to Ben thought there might have been another reason. Ben soaked in a lot of this talk as the time of the examination approached, and little by little he convinced himself that he hadn't a chance. He would be sidetracked. Somewhere along the way individuals who did not really practice democracy would find ways to work behind the scenes, with a wink here, a nudge and a hint there, to make sure "something happened" to prevent another colored boy from wearing the uniform of a West Point Cadet. Ben~~~~

thought of such things a great deal in 1931, and presently he found that his first excitement at being appointed to West Point had vanished entirely. He didn't even bother to review algebra or otherwise get in shape for the tests. What was the use when you knew you couldn't win?

In a dull, listless mood Ben Davis went down and took the examinations. He failed.

But sometimes the seeds of victory are planted in defeat. Sometimes failure lights the way to success. Sometimes death is the forerunner of life. Sometimes a flunked exam is the best thing in the world to put a fellow wise to himself. Ben Davis's failure to pass the entrance examinations to West Point in 1931 was all of these things. The most important result, however, was something as slight as a hunch, an impression. Ben came out of that set of examinations with the definite feeling that he could, if he turned on the heat, make Uncle Sam's Military Academy. The tests hadn't been so bad. And the fellows who sat with him for the tests were good sports, no different from the ones around

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Page 4  
Western Reserve and the University of Chicago. Ben was convinced he could get along with them. There ~~was~~ had even been a little friendly, get-acquainted crap

game between sections of the tests, and everything was as pleasant as you please. Something about that examination and his failure in it convinced Ben that the forces against him were no greater than those that worked in his favor. He felt for the first time that he definitely had a chance. In fact, he had a second chance.

During January and February of 1932 Ben knuckled down to a couple of months of solid digging. He was reviewing and freshening up on the subjects covered by the examinations. He had been reappointed, and he was taking a second crack at the entrance ~~examination~~ requirements. Then in March he sat down with another bunch of college boys, and a few of the old ones who had come back like himself, determined to make up for lost time. This time Ben was ready- ready in mind and spirit- and the result is history now. The whole nation heard the news when Benjamin Oliver Davis, Jr., got the returns from his tests and headed for West Point with the class that entered the first day of July, 1932.

But many Americans watched with doubt and fear. Would this be a repetition of what had happen a couple of years earlier? Would young Ben end his career in the same way? Many eyebrows were raised. Not Ben's however. He had been pointed out to the world as a representative of all colored youth. Some Americans whose education had failed to teach ~~ed~~ them that there is no such thing as superior or inferior races, only inferior and superior individuals, wondered whether or not a colored boy could stand the rigid tempering Uncle Sam gives his cadets. Colored Americans and many others who had begun to doubt the fairness of democracy when it comes to giving a chance to any worthy and deserving boy sat back and waited for the doublecross- wondering what form it would take this time. Many of them grew intensely sad, for they were all greatly impressed by young Ben. They thought he was muck too fine a kid to suffer what they believed to be in store for him.

But Ben let them all think ~~would~~ what they would. He entered the Military Academy on the first day of July, and a curtain fell between him and the outside world, a curtain which seldom raised- and then only brief moments- during the next four years. Now, however- now that it is all safely in the past, a few fragments of his West Point experience can be recalled. The story is pieced-together by reading between the lines of Ben's own simple account of life in the Military Academy and by combining these with impressions brought out by his own classmates and instructors. There is no longer a doubt that a significant American drama was acted out during those four tense years- a drama which came close to tragedy at times but finally rose to a happy ending  
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