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National Museum of African American History and Culture

Pamphlet: A Negro Looks at War

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enough. He got his from a big shell- and after weeks of torture, what was left him was shipped home, more dead than alive.

* * *

CORPORAL ZACH BROWN never got to France. He was quartered down in Texas at Camp Logan. His battalion was part of the 24th Infantry—a famous old Negro regiment in the regular U.S. Army. As was customary, members of this regiment were assigned to military police duty in the community in which its men were quartered. This was more than the local lynchers could stand. Negro soldiers. Negroes with rifles. And to top it off, Negroes assigned to police duty in cooperation with the local white authorities.

Vicious and persistent insults met the Negro soldiers at every turn. Hostility against them was raised to fever heat. And then one day Corporal Brown was publicly beaten by a bunch of white uniformed thugs. Many others had met the same fate. When Brown returned to camp, disheveled, his uniform torn, the men seized their rifles, and with Corporal Brown and Sergeant James at their head, descended on the town.

Nothing could stop them as they stormed their way toward the police station, the center and stronghold of their enemies. The whole town was finally surrounded by white troops, in the effort to capture the mutinous Negro soldiers. Sergeant James committed suicide before he was caught. Corporal Brown didn't. The entire battalion was put under arrest, shipped away to Columbus, New Mexico, where a drumhead court-martial had convened. Thirteen men, including Brown, were sentenced to death. They were denied even a soldier's death, and were hanged like common criminals. Ninety-nine got sentences of from a few years to life. The last of them was pardoned in 1938—after twenty years in jail!

Corporal Brown stood on the trapdoor of the gallows that bright morning in 1917. Wisp-ends of thoughts flashed

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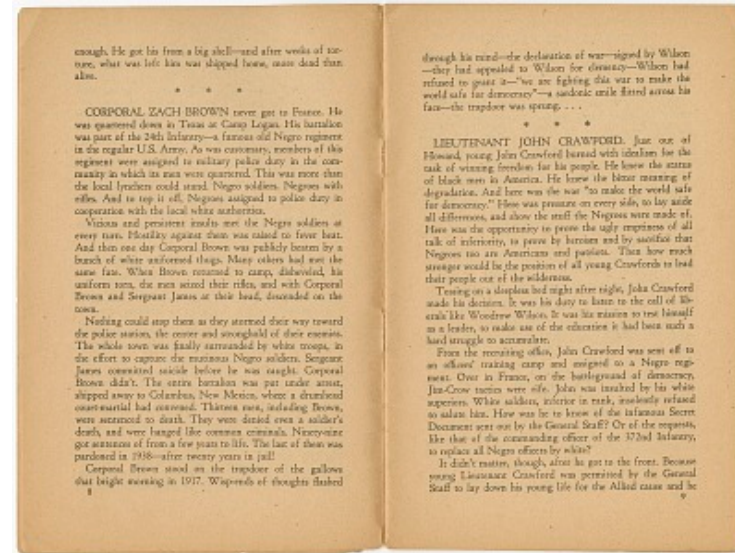
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through his mind—the declaration of war—signed by Wilson—they had appealed to Wilson for clemency—Wilson had refused to grant it—"we are fighting this war to make the world safe for democracy"—a sardonic smile flitted across his face—the trapdoor was sprung....

* * *

LIEUTENANT JOHN CRAWFORD. Just out of Howard, young John Crawford burned with idealism for the task of winning freedom for his people. He knew the status of black men in America. He knew the bitter meaning of degradation. And here was the war "to make the world safe for democracy." Here was pressure on every side, to lay aside all differences, and show the stuff the Negroes were made of. Here was the opportunity to prove the ugly emptiness of all talk of inferiority, to prove by heroism and by sacrifice that Negroes too are Americans and patriots. Then how much stronger would be the position of all young Crawfords to lead their people out of the wilderness.

Tossing on a sleepless bed night after night, John Crawford made his decision. It was his duty to listen to the call of liberals like Woodrow Wilson. It was his mission to test himself as a leader, to make use of the education it had been such a hard struggle to accumulate.



From the recruiting office, John Crawford was sent off to an officers' training camp and assigned to a Negro regiment. Over in France, on the battleground of democracy, Jim-Crow tactics were rife. John was insulted by his white superiors. White soldiers, inferior in rank, insolently refused to salute him. How was he to know of the infamous Secret Document sent out by the General Staff? Or of the requests, like that of the commanding officer of the 372nd Infantry, to replace all Negro officers by white?

It didn't matter, though, after he got to the front. Because young Lieutenant Crawford was permitted by the General Staff to lay down his young life for the Allied cause and he

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