Author Sheds Light on Black History

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by T. Anthony Bell Senior Writer/Special Assignments |

FORT LEE, Va. (Feb. 17, 2011) -Noted author, history enthusiast and filmmaker Robert V. Morris seems to have a knack for looking between the cracks of black history and shedding light on unknown or previously overlooked information and facts.

The Iowa native and former journalism professor shared some of the insights he's gained over the years with 50 or so military members and civilians who gathered for an African-American/Black History Month presentation and book-signing at the U.S. Army Women's Museum Feb. 10.

The event was sponsored by Installation Equal Opportunity Office Morris in conjunction with the Army Women's Museum.

Morris, author of the newly published book, "Black Faces of War: A Legacy of Honor from the American Revolution to Today," talked about various figures and events in black history and offered a number of perspectives in relation to their impact. He emphasized the influence military institutions and military members had in helping African-Americans climb the various rungs of American society.

"Next to the black church, the military has brought on more social change in this nation than any other institution because of the GI Bill after World War II that created the black middle class of today and after World War I, because of the new territory they saw," said Morris, whose grandfather and father served as officers in World War I and II, respectively.

The wars also produced more capable black leaders. Morris cited, for example, the first officer training camp for blacks established at Fort Des Moines, Iowa, in 1917.

"The camp adviser was a guy named George Woodson, who was one of the 39 founders of the Niagara Movement in 1905, which later became the NAACP in 1909," he said. "You had the main founder of the Kappa Alpha Psi; you had two of the four founders of Omega Psi Phi fraternities; you had three of five founders of the National Bar Association; you had one of the founders of the National Newspapers Publishers Association, which is now called America's Black Press. You had incredible leadership there."

Bolstered by their individual achievements and the varied experiences of military service, many black men and women who served in the world wars went on to make contributions large and small to their communities and society at large.

"Most leaders of the Civil Rights Movement were ex-military guys," said Morris. "Now, they were trained in tactics, logistics and everything else you could think of, so they were natural fits for the movement."

Veterans-turned-civil rights leaders like Hosea Williams, Medgar Evers and Whitney Young played important roles in the Movement, which eventually led to landmark legislation that guaranteed the equal treatment of all U.S. citizens.

Morris talked about numerous individuals who made their marks as well but who remained in obscurity. Salem Poor and Peter Salem, while not as well known as Crispus Attucks (the first man to die in the Revolutionary War), both fought gallantly against the British and were guaranteed their freedom through acts of Congress, said Morris.

Thousands of blacks, added Morris, fought for the British in the Revolutionary War because they were promised freedom. Many of them ended up in Canada and never returned.

Morris also talked about the injustices of military service. The Medal of Honor was not awarded to any blacks during WWII. President Bill Clinton belatedly awarded the medal to seven in 1997. Only Vernon Baker lived to bask in the honor.

"(1st Lt.) Vernon Baker put on his Class A uniform because he knew he was going to get killed, and he wanted to look good when he went out to battle that day," said Morris of Baker, who led an effort that killed 26 Germans in Italy during 1945.

Morris said he became interested in black military history mostly out of coincidence. He grew up listening to stories told by his grandfather, WWI veteran James B. Morris Sr., and father, WWII veteran James B. Morris Jr.

As a result of their service, Morris said he became acquainted with many important figures during those times. The book, he said, is a tribute

to all those who served to better the lives of their people and for all Americans.

"The activities in which I have participated in the historical arena are labors of love because I grew up around so many of these guys. They were just great men," he said, "men of great moral character and fiber. My slant on all of this is anything I can do to honor them is worth my time."

Morris developed the Fort Des Moines Memorial in 1997. The $10 million project honors the U.S. Army's first officer candidate class for African-American men in 1917and the establishment of the first Women's Army Auxiliary Corps in 1942.

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