

Benjamin O. Davis, Senior

Benjamin O. Davis Sr. Stamp



Record Information

Source: U.S. Postal Service.

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Date: 1997

Description:

Benjamin O. Davis Sr. was the first African American to become a general in the U.S. Army. In addition to serving in the military, he also taught military science and tactics at Wilberforce University in Ohio and at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. This stamp, one in a series commemorating black heritage, was issued on January 28, 1997.

Benjamin O. Davis, Sr., rose slowly through the ranks. In 1905, he became one of only two African-American officers on active duty in the U.S. Army; 35 years later, nearing the end of a long career, he was the first African American to wear a general's stars.

Benjamin Oliver Davis, Sr., was born on May 28, 1880, in Washington, D.C. He lied about his age in 1898, when he joined the army to fight in the Spanish-American War, according to biographer Marvin Fletcher, because he did not have his parents' permission to enlist. That lie remained alive beyond his death, and his birthdate is still listed as July 1, 1877, in official military records and other sources.

His father, Louis Davis, was a government messenger, and his mother, Henrietta Stewart Davis, was a nurse. Having two incomes permitted the Davises to be one of the few African-American families in Washington to own a house. Benjamin, the youngest of the three Davis children, discovered his vocation in boyhood, while watching a troop of the African-American 9th Cavalry parade at Fort Myer, Virginia.

During his senior year at all-black M Street High School, he took courses at Howard University. As a member of his high school cadet corps, he practiced military drills, learned to shoot a Springfield rifle, and rose to the rank of captain of Cadet

Company B. He talked about becoming a soldier, but his father steered him toward a job in government, and his mother urged him to be a minister.

With the outbreak of the Spanish-American War in 1898, Benjamin Davis enlisted as a temporary first lieutenant in the 8th United States Volunteer Infantry, an ad hoc black army unit being formed to meet wartime needs. The war with Spain ended before he could be sent to Cuba, and no longer needed by the army, he was discharged.

Determined to live a soldier's life, Davis sought an appointment to the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York. The color barrier at the academy had been broken by Henry Ossian Flipper, who graduated in 1877; nevertheless, President William McKinley was unwilling to appoint an African-American cadet. Therefore, on June 18, 1899, Davis enlisted in the army as a private and was stationed at Fort Duschene, Utah, with Troop 1 of the 9th Cavalry.

All of the officers assigned to the regiment were white, with the exception of Major Charles Young, the third African American to graduate from West Point (in 1889), who was the only black officer in the army at that time. Young took Davis under his wing and for two years coached him in academics, surveying, and drill regulations, preparing him to take an examination to qualify as an officer. Davis passed the test and was commissioned a second lieutenant on February 2, 1901.

The United States had acquired the Philippine Islands from Spain following the Spanish-American War. Davis served with the 9th and 10th Cavalry in the Philippines in 1901, before being sent to Fort Washakie, Wyoming, as adjutant with the 10th Cavalry. He married Elnora Dickerson, a Washington seamstress, in 1902.

Army brass took great pains in choosing Davis's assignments to avoid the "indignity" of a black officer commanding white troops. Davis was professor of military science and tactics at historically black Wilberforce University in Ohio from September 1905 through September 1909, and again from February 1915 until the summer of 1917. Between those assignments, from late 1909 to January 1912, he was military attaché to the African nation of Liberia. Davis spent the period of U.S. involvement in World War I in the Philippines, as supply officer with the 9th Cavalry. He had been promoted to first lieutenant on March 30, 1905, and to captain on December 24, 1915.

Elnora Dickerson Davis died in 1916, following the birth of the couple's third child; in 1919, Benjamin Davis, Sr., married Sadie Overton, a professor of English at Wilberforce. On July 1, 1920, Davis was promoted to lieutenant colonel; in that year the Davis family moved to Tuskegee, Alabama, site of the famed vocational school for African Americans, the Tuskegee Institute, where Davis once more taught military science and tactics. In July 1924, he was placed in command of the 372nd Infantry, an African-American unit of the Ohio National Guard, stationed at Cleveland.

The army failed to make the best use of this capable officer, giving him disappointing and unchallenging assignments because of his race. Davis served

uncomplainingly and to the best of his ability, however, and attained the rank of colonel on February 18, 1930. From 1930 to 1933, he escorted widows and mothers of U.S. soldiers killed in World War I to Europe to visit their loved ones' graves. The secretary of war and the quartermaster general commended him for the sensitivity and tact with which he carried out this duty.

Davis taught at Tuskegee until August 1937, when he was sent back to Wilberforce for a year. He next served as instructor and commanding officer of the 369th Infantry, New York National Guard, and, beginning in January 1941, as a brigade commander with the 2nd Cavalry Division at Fort Riley, Kansas.

On October 25, 1940, Davis was promoted to brigadier general, becoming the first African-American general in U.S. history. He retired less than a year later, officially having reached the mandatory retirement age of 64. Then, as the United States readied itself militarily for its eventual entry into World War II, General Davis was called back to active duty and stationed in Washington, D.C., in the office of the inspector general. The army anticipated the induction of 100,000 African-American soldiers, and Davis was to report on morale and discipline in black units.

In October 1942, with the United States involved in the war in Europe and in the Pacific, General Davis was ordered to Great Britain to advise the army on racial problems within units stationed there. After interviewing white and black enlisted personnel, Davis determined that white soldiers resented the fact that most British people lacked prejudice based on skin color and treated all Americans in uniform equally. In a statement that might have applied to his own career as much as to the problem at hand, Davis reported to his superiors, "I fear overmuch emphasis is being placed on color in our Army."

In 1944, at Ramitelli, Italy, Davis pinned a Distinguished Flying Cross on his son, Colonel Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., who commanded the Tuskegee Airmen, the first African-American pilots in the U.S. armed forces. In November 1944, General Davis was stationed in Paris as special assistant to the commanding general of the Communications Zone for the European Theater of Operations.

In 1947, General Benjamin O. Davis, Sr., represented the United States in Liberia at a ceremony marking the 100th anniversary of that nation's independence. He retired from the army in 1948, the year President Harry S. Truman signed Executive Order 9981, ending segregation in the military. Following his retirement, he inspected American cemeteries at Anzio, Italy, and other World War II battle sites for the Battle Monuments Commission.

Declining health forced General Davis to retire from public life in 1960. He died of leukemia on November 26, 1970, and was buried at Arlington National Cemetery. Toward the end of his life, he summed up his career by saying, "I did my duty. That's what I set out to do—to show that I could make my way if I knew my job."

General Davis's decorations included the Bronze Star and the Distinguished Service Medal. He received the Croix de Guerre with Palm from France and the Grade of Commander of the Order of the Star of Africa from Liberia.

Refernces and Further Information

Bankston, Carl L., III. *African American History*. Vol. 3. Pasadena, Calif.: Salem Press, 2006, p. 1,103.

"Benjamin Oliver Davis, Sr." U.S. Army Center of Military History. Available online. URL: <http://www.history.army.mil/topics/afam/davis.htm>. Downloaded on August 10, 2008.

Fletcher, Marvin. *America's First Black General: Benjamin O. Davis, Sr.: 1880–1970*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1989.