In this dissertation, I examine and analyze the experiences of African American servicemen in World War II through the lens of double consciousness. I argue that the black experience in the United States military and encounters with different cultures overseas changed and raised consciousness in African American troops in both productive and destructive ways. In turn, this new consciousness contributed to racial progress and new attitudes on the homefront upon their return. Using an interdisciplinary approach to the topic, I incorporate oral testimonies from black veterans, theory on double consciousness, and elements of 1940s black literature to provide a comprehensive cultural overview of the black community in general and servicemen in particular. This study also makes a critical connection between World War II and the civil rights movement. The veterans’ stories and their role in the black community played an important role in the desegregation of the U.S. military and subsequently in further progress toward equal rights. The black military experience provides not only a deeper understanding of personal psychology, but also a more comprehensive picture of the implications of black service in World War II.

Overseas, African American servicemen had a variety of new experiences. Some faced a different sort of treatment than back in America, witnessed new cultures, or found common threads of humanity with people throughout the world. Many of their encounters, travels, and military and wartime experiences led to new worldviews. These experiences enlightened many servicemen as to the unnatural character of the racial situation in America and demonstrated even more urgently the need for change. Before integration could take place, African American troops and communities had to undergo a transformation, acquire new consciousness, and bring the fight back to the homefront in new and more insistent ways.

This dissertation will examine the period from the passage of the Selective Service and Training Act in 1940 to the end of the Korean War in 1953. It will begin with an investigation of the process of
change throughout World War II from the troops’ training, deployment, tenure overseas, and return home and discharge. I will investigate what the veterans did in the postwar period, from employment to involvement in community or civil rights organizations. All four branches of the service—Army, Army Air Corps (Air Force), Navy, and Marine Corps—will be considered in this study. Each branch provides a different perspective on the war, the process of desegregation, and various geographical locations.

Theoretically, the idea of double consciousness plays an important part in the analysis of troops’ experiences. W.E.B. Du Bois described double consciousness as the dilemma of reconciling black identity with American identity. He argued that African Americans were always aware of a “two-ness,” an American and a Negro, “two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body.”2 This notion of a disconnect between different facets of one’s identity became particularly relevant to African American servicemen fighting for a nation that refused to accept them. I plan to examine the potential and limitations of this concept in regard to black servicemen in World War II and the postwar period.

While African Americans struggled against the color line in the past, for instance in the post-World War I period, the scale of World War II as well as the political climate in the United States helped to initiate a transformation. Not everyone could cope with the harsh realities of life in the segregated military; there were “psychological casualties.”3 Yet before true change and integration could take place, African American troops and communities had to undergo a transformation and acquire new consciousness and will to fight. For those who survived physically and mentally, military service brought them face to face with new realms of possibility, raised questions, consciousness, and for some, allowed them to push at the color line in the years to come.
