

HERVIEUX MEMORANDUM

Subject: Response to the Army's Information Paper declining to reconsider Waverly B. Woodson Medal of Honor Request

October 7, 2021

The Army's Information Paper dated Aug. 9, 2021, declined a request to reconsider the award of a posthumous Medal of Honor for Waverly B. Woodson. The Army suggests the supporters of the Woodson bid hire a private researcher to search the relevant records at the National Archives.

I can attest that as a private researcher, I spent many weeks over the course of three years at the National Archives in College Park, Maryland, searching for records pertaining to Waverly Woodson's service on Omaha Beach. I was aided by numerous staff archivists, including the chief archivist, over three visits between 2010 and 2013. We searched many record groups in the divisions referenced by the Army. The 49th AAA Brigade records yielded references to Woodson's battalion but not to Woodson or this matter. A search up the chain to the higher echelons including First Army also yielded no relevant information. I requested staff journals, after-action reports, and any other peripheral record groups which the NARA staff archivists believed might contain a reference from which we could gain some clues as to where else we might search. It was a massive hunting expedition. On my final visit in December 2013, we retraced our steps and then, going beyond the obvious record groups, the chief archivist personally searched scores of records for me with the hope that the controversial nature of this decoration — an African American under consideration for the Medal of Honor in a segregated Army not inclined to award it to him — might be tucked in this cache of records. They were not.

During the years I researched my book "Forgotten," on the suggestion of NARA College Park staff archivists, I expanded my search to other Army archives. I obtained records from the National Archives in St. Louis, Mo. I traveled to the Army Archives at the Carlisle, Penn., Barracks. I traveled to the Eisenhower Library Archives in Abilene, Kansas, I spoke with archivists at the First Division Museum in Illinois. Finally, I went to the Truman Library Archives in Independence, Mo., where I already knew that a team of independent researchers had previously found the telltale note contained in the Papers of Philleo Nash. One of these researchers, Elliott V. Converse, told me in a phone interview that they had combed the Truman Archives and there was no other mention of Woodson. I went anyway and, with the enthusiastic assistance of staff archivists, found no other mention of Woodson.

The Nash note is worth discussing again because it is extraordinary, revealing that Corporal Waverly Woodson was under consideration for the Medal of Honor. The provenance of that note, though unsigned, is clear: It is included in a folder of correspondence between Nash, an assistant to the director of the Office of War Information, to Jonathan Daniels, an aide to President Roosevelt.

While Nash, of course, did not have first-hand knowledge of the events on Omaha Beach on June 6, 1944, he was indeed aware, as he wrote, that Waverly Woodson's commanding officer, Lt. Col. Leon J. Reed, recommended Woodson for the Distinguished Service Cross, which the Office of U.S. Gen. John C.H. Lee — General Eisenhower's deputy ETO commander — saw fit to upgrade. According to Lee's office in Britain, Woodson's actions "merited" the Medal of Honor. The note indicates a U.S. senator, Joseph F. Guffey, was "working on" obtaining the award for Woodson. I searched for papers of General

Lee and Senator Guffey to no avail. However, the fact that Nash wrote to Daniels of these efforts **indicates that there was high-level communication and knowledge of Woodson's actions on June 6, 1944.**

It is also exceptional that Nash would suggest that President might award the medal personally to Woodson. I found no similar communication during my research pertaining to any other Black soldier.

How do we know first-hand details of Woodson's actions on Omaha Beach? Attached to the Nash note is an Army news release dated 28 August 1944 describing Woodson's heroism. The other medics who accompanied Woodson on Omaha Beach were mentioned only in passing. Yet the release notes that **"all other participants" attested to Woodson's valor.** Indeed, with this news release the Army indicates there **was ample first-hand evidence** of Woodson's unique heroism.

The Converse team of five independent researchers, hired by the Army in 1993 to investigate why no African Americans were awarded the Medal of Honor during World War II, looked extensively for Woodson's records to no avail, which is why Woodson was not among the seven cases the team recommended for the Medal of Honor. Converse told me they were bound by Army regulations.

They write: "Woodson's decoration case file has not been found, and his individual personnel record was apparently destroyed in the fire at the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis in 1973. A search of other pertinent files and collections yielded no documents about Woodson."

To recap: Five expert researchers with ample time and resources were unable to find Woodson's records. Nearly 20 years later, I, too, was unable to find them even with the ample assistance of NARA's own expert archivists.

These records no longer exist.

Given that fact, why should the Army reconsider the petition to award Waverly Woodson the Medal of Honor without the required documentation?

Before answering that question, it is worth noting that, to me, the missing records seemed strange and raised a red flag. **How could a case file that had reached the highest echelons of the War Department and the White House disappear without a trace?** To the staff archivists at NARA College Park, however, the missing records were not unusual. They told me, repeatedly, that only one percent of Army records from WWII have been retained.

Assuming the Woodson records are among this one percent, I would contend it is simply unfair to penalize the case for Woodson due to the Army's own lapse, particularly given that there is ample ancillary evidence of Woodson's heroics produced by the Army itself in 1944.

Or perhaps there is another reason lurking behind the absence of records pertaining to the only African-American soldier singled out for the top honor for his actions on Omaha Beach.

In their report, "The Exclusion of Black Soldiers from the Medal of Honor in World War II," (McFarland, 1997) the Converse team concluded (page 4) that Black soldiers "were denied, by segregation and the general policy of exclusion from combat, the same opportunities to earn the Medal as whites. Further,

the racism that pervaded the Army during the War not only hurt the effectiveness of some Black units in combat ... and may have prevented any black soldier in those units from being nominated for the Medal.” The report cites extensive discrimination and racism present in all ranks of the Army, and how this climate, buttressed by official policy, led to the mistreatment of African Americans.

The Army, quite clearly, did not want to award the Medal of Honor to a man of color.

Woodson and his fellow medics were given the Bronze Star for their actions on Omaha Beach. Each medic received the same decoration, even though the other medics, while clearly deserving of acknowledgement, were not cited by the Army, as Woodson was, for exceptional valor. **Yet the medics accompanying Woodson were no doubt the first-person sources — “all other participants” — cited in the Army news release attesting to Woodson’s heroism.**

It is time to leave precedent aside and accept the proof as it stands: Corporal Waverly Woodson, a hero on Omaha Beach, deserves the posthumous award of our nation’s highest honor.

Linda Hervieux

Author of [Forgotten, The Untold Story of D-Day’s Black Heroes](#)