

## 1945 December 10-16

### The Segregated Services

#### La Crosse Officer Supervised Colored Unit Unloading Ships



—Tribune Photo  
**GEORGE B. CERNY**

(*La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 December 16, page 13)

In the 1989 Hollywood movie [Glory](#), Matthew Broderick and Cary Elwes portray the white officers commanding the [54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment](#) during the Civil War. The Regiment is made up of all Black soldiers, including actors Denzel Washington and Morgan Freeman, who gradually bond with their officers and earn the grudging respect of white Northern soldiers. The climax of the film is their suicidal attack on a Confederate fort at Charleston, South Carolina, and many of them are killed and unceremoniously tossed into a mass grave.<sup>1</sup>

The movie was based on the real-life [54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment](#) which was the first Northern unit of the Civil War consisting of black soldiers. There were doubts about the fighting abilities of Blacks, and commissioning Black officers was considered too controversial at the time. The 1,000 Black enlisted men went into battle commanded by white officers, led by their commander, [Colonel Robert Gould Shaw](#). In the assault on [Fort Wagner](#) at Charleston in July 1863, Shaw was killed

and almost half of his men were killed, wounded, or missing by the end of the attack. Because of their bravery, other Black units were accepted and able to serve in the Union Army for the rest of the war.<sup>2</sup>

Almost 80 years after the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation, the armed forces of the United States were still segregated. Servicemen and servicewomen from La Crosse County, where very few Blacks had lived up to that time, would normally have little contact with Blacks in the armed forces during World War II. Two La Crosse men, however, were in the unique situation of commanding Black soldiers.

George B. Cerny's grandfather, also named George Cerny, came to the United States from [Bohemia](#) (Czech Republic) in about 1849, when he was 24 years old. George Cerny was a lumber scaler for the John Paul and Coleman lumber companies for many years before working as a clerk for the La Crosse Board of Public Works. He then spent ten years as an insurance agent. When he died in 1928, one of his survivors was George Cerny, Jr.<sup>3</sup>

George Joseph Cerny and his wife, Helen, lived at 421 Mississippi Street. George was a woodworker for the [Segelke-Kohlhaus Company](#) at 2nd and Cass streets.<sup>4</sup> Their son, George Bernard Cerny, was born on December 5, 1912.<sup>5</sup> They had another son named Robert George Cerny. Helen Cerny was just 37 years old when she died on December 30, 1928.<sup>6</sup> Young George was in his junior year at La Crosse Central High School.

George Bernard Cerny graduated from La Crosse Central in June 1930.<sup>7</sup>



George Bernard Cerny, 1930

(*Booster*, La Crosse Central High School yearbook, 1930, page 39)

Cerny was one of the speakers at the graduation ceremony. In his speech, he said:

The first responsibility in this world is to contribute to life, not to go out of life indebted to the world, but to leave the common life richer for our having lived. Men of genius can do this by their words of art and their inventions. The rest of us must accomplish it by the direct effect of our lives upon others, by useful work we do, the result of which will live after us.<sup>8</sup>

The rest of Cerny's life was devoted to that principle.

His early adult years were spent in a variety of work and educational experiences. Cerny worked at the Liggett Drug company for several years. He also worked three years in the office at the Adam Kroner company in La Crosse. Cerny attended the University of Minnesota and then the University of Wisconsin. At the latter, he majored in government.<sup>9</sup>

While a student at the University of Wisconsin, Cerny organized eating clubs based on cooperative models.<sup>10</sup> The first was the Congregational or Congo Co-op Eating Club in February 1936. Fifty students ate lunch and dinner on the second floor of the Congregational Student House six days a week. Each of them paid \$3.60 per week and contributed two hours of work every day. The cook was an employee of the cooperative, and the student business manager and student accountant received free meals for their work. Each member paid \$2.00 for a share of stock in the cooperative, which entitled them to one vote at meetings of the organization. The other eating clubs---Catholic Cooperative Eating Club, Wayland or Baptist Club, Three Squares or Methodist Eating Club--operated in a similar way.<sup>11</sup>

Cerny graduated from the University of Wisconsin in 1938.<sup>12</sup>

That same year, he made a foray into politics with an unsuccessful run for La Crosse County Clerk on the [Progressive Party](#) ticket.<sup>13</sup> Republican incumbent Esther M. Domke garnered over 12,500 votes to Cerny's 4,384.<sup>14</sup>

Cerny's experience with the eating club cooperatives provided a different career path. By 1940, he was working for Cooperative Services, Inc., in Minneapolis. He lived at 1721 University Avenue SE in Minneapolis.<sup>15</sup> Cerny was the educational director for Cooperative Services.<sup>16</sup>

Then he was hired in the statistics branch of the office of the assistant secretary of war in Washington, D.C., and this is where he was working when he was drafted into the Army.<sup>17</sup> He was inducted into the United States Army on April 8, 1941, at Baltimore, Maryland, as a private.<sup>18</sup>

At the beginning of 1942, he was stationed at [Fort Meade](#), Maryland.<sup>19</sup>

In September 1942, George Cerny was commissioned as a second lieutenant at [Fort Benning](#), Georgia. He was then transferred to [Camp Robinson](#), Arkansas, where he was on the training staff of the 56th Battalion, 12th Regiment. Camp Robinson was a replacement training center.<sup>20</sup> Cerny taught infantry tactics to new recruits.<sup>21</sup>

While at Camp Robinson, Lt. Cerny married Ann Perschbacher, an English teacher at La Crosse Central High School, on March 13, 1943, on the base. A native of West Bend, Wisconsin, Perschbacher was a graduate of [Lawrence University](#) and did graduate work in English literature at [Northwestern University](#). They set up housekeeping in Little Rock, Arkansas.<sup>22</sup>



*(La Crosse Tribune, 1943 February 14, page 3)*

The journey of Herbert J. Geiwitz into World War II started earlier and was more direct.

Geiwitz, a La Crosse native, attended the University of Wisconsin.<sup>23</sup> He then transferred to Beloit College.<sup>24</sup> After graduating from Beloit College, Geiwitz joined his father in the New York Life Insurance company in La Crosse. He married Alta E. Forss, a graduate of La Crosse State Teachers College, in September 1927. They initially made their home at 814 17th Street S.<sup>25</sup>

Geiwitz joined the Army Reserve and held the rank of 2nd Lieutenant. His obligation included active duty during summer camps at Camp McCoy in the 1930s.<sup>26</sup>

Early in World War II, Army Reserve personnel were called to active duty. Geiwitz was activated in May 1941.<sup>27</sup> First Lieutenant Herbert Geiwitz was assigned to the [Quartermaster Corps](#) at [Fort Sheridan, Illinois](#). In March 1942, he was transferred to [Camp Lee, Virginia](#).<sup>28</sup>

At this stage of the war, neither man could know that they would later be part of one of the controversial aspects of the United States armed forces in World War II.

During World War I, more than 380,000 Blacks served in the United States Army. Of the approximately 200,000 who were sent to Europe, more than half were assigned to labor and stevedore battalions. Men who had trained as infantrymen found themselves fixing docks, unloading and loading supplies, and laying railroad tracks. The all-Black 92nd Infantry Division would eventually see combat, but with French

forces.<sup>29</sup> Black and white soldiers were in segregated units, a situation that mirrored segregation back in the United States.

World War II would be just more of the same. As historian Stephen Ambrose put it, "The world's greatest democracy fought the world's greatest racist [Adolf Hitler] with a segregated Army."<sup>30</sup>



1st Lt. Herbert Geiwitz

(*La Crosse Tribune*, 1942 March 8, page 2)

In 1941, less than 4,000 Blacks were in the United States armed forces. There were only 12 Black officers in the entire United States military.<sup>31</sup> Blacks were relegated to menial duties. In the Navy, for example, Blacks served as messmen---making beds, shining shoes for white officers, and waiting on white officers in the officer's mess [lunch room].<sup>32</sup>

One of those lowly messmen showed from the very beginning that shooting and being shot at respected no racial demographics. Doris "Dorie" Miller, a grandson of slaves, a son of Texas sharecroppers, and a high school dropout won the [Navy Cross](#) for heroism during the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Part of the crew on the battleship [West Virginia](#), Miller manned a machinegun and fired on Japanese planes after his battle station in the ship's magazine was flooded. He is also credited with rescuing several of his shipmates. Miller was one of the last three men to abandon ship. On November 24, 1943, Miller was one of over 600 men who went down with the escort aircraft carrier [Liscome Bay](#) when it was sunk by a Japanese submarine's torpedo during the invasion of Tarawa.<sup>33</sup>

Before the end of the war, more than 1.2 million Blacks would be serving in the United States armed forces. They were mostly in non-combat units such as supply, maintenance, and transportation.<sup>34</sup>



Army stevedores training in a cargo ship mock-up at Fort Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania, 1942 ca.

[ExplorePAhistory.com](http://ExplorePAhistory.com)

George Cerny and Herman Geiwitz commanded Black units performing these functions.

After a month of training in the quartermaster school at Camp Lee, Virginia, 1st Lt. Geiwitz was sent to an Army Air Force base in Jackson, Mississippi. He commanded an all-Black truck company for three months. His company moved to Barksdale, Louisiana, for a month; Geiwitz was then put in command of another Black company. They moved to Fort Myers, Florida, before shipping out to Glasgow, Scotland, on September 25, 1942. After moving from Scotland to Liverpool, England, Geiwitz went to Bristol, England, where he was put in command of five truck companies.<sup>35</sup>



Black truck drivers in World War II

(National Archives)

Geiwitz left his Black troops and moved on to 8th Air Force headquarters as assistant command quartermaster. He was promoted to captain in November 1942. After several transfers in England, he was promoted to major in January 1944 when he was with the 9th Air Force. His service continued in France, Belgium, Holland, and Germany until the end of the war.<sup>36</sup>



—Tribune Photo  
MAJ. HERBERT GEIWITZ

(*La Crosse Tribune*, 1945 December 16, page 11)

Lt. Cerny was sent to Liverpool, England, in August 1943, where he commanded ship unloading by the [490th Port Battalion](#). When his unit landed on Utah Beach on D-Day in Normandy, France, Cerny was in charge of the 200 men unloading supplies from ships. His unit handled more tonnage in one day than any two similar units. They remained there until Thanksgiving 1944 before moving by ship to Le Havre and then taking trucks to Rouen. After the war in Europe ended, Cerny was to be redeployed to the Pacific Theater. When Japan surrendered, he was placed on terminal leave awaiting his discharge.



Tuskegee Airmen

([Smithsonian Magazine](#))

As the war required more manpower, Blacks filled more roles in the military, including combat. Many Blacks were truck drivers in the [Red Ball Express](#) that transported a half million tons of supplies in France. The all-Black [761st Tank Battalion](#) was part of General Patton's Third Army in Europe. Black pilots known as the [Tuskegee Airmen](#) flew with the 15th Air Force in Italy.<sup>37</sup> More than 12,500 Blacks served in Navy Seabee units in both Europe and the Pacific.<sup>38</sup> Blacks who volunteered to leave their rear-echelon jobs for combat in Europe in early 1945 received favorable comments from white officers.<sup>39</sup> General Maxwell Taylor recommended the all-Black [969th Field Artillery Battalion](#) for a Distinguished Unit Citation.<sup>40</sup> The all-Black [92nd \(Buffalo\) Infantry Division](#) became part of the Fifth Army fighting in Italy. General Mark Clark wrote that the division "played a most important part in the victory."<sup>41</sup>



Despite the contributions of Black soldiers, sailors, and airmen, racism did not take a holiday just because there was a war on. Lt. Jackie Robinson, who would later break the color barrier in major league baseball, was court-martialed for refusing to move to the back of an Army bus at Fort Hood, Texas, in July 1944.<sup>42</sup> Black soldiers in the South had to go to the back door of restaurants to get sandwiches while German prisoners-of-war sat down inside and were served.<sup>43</sup> On one island in the Pacific, a group of marines reportedly threw hand grenades and smoke bombs into a camp of Black navy personnel several times. These incidents erupted into a fatal clash between white and black servicemen. One black serviceman was shot and killed, while another was wounded.<sup>44</sup>



Black artillerymen in Europe

[\(Drexel University\)](#)

United States Senator James O. Eastland of Mississippi, a white supremacist who made a career out of opposing civil rights and rooting out supposed "domestic subversives,"<sup>45</sup> declared on the floor of the United States Senate that Black service in the armed forces during the war had been "an utter and abysmal failure." He singled out the 92nd Infantry Division for criticism and said none of the Black officers could perform "in a responsible position."<sup>46</sup>

Unfortunately, we have no record of what George Cerny and Herbert Geiwitz thought about the Black soldiers under their command.

The irony of Blacks fighting for the freedom of people in foreign lands while they themselves were less than free in their homeland was apparent to many.

President Harry S. Truman signed Executive Order 9981 on July 26, 1948, establishing the President's Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services. This was one of several actions Truman took to advance civil rights in the United States. "Equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion or national origin," as the order required, did not happen immediately. There was resistance in the military, but by the end of the next war (Korea, 1950-1953) the United States armed forces were largely integrated.<sup>47</sup> It was one of the milestones in the long march toward racial equality that is still to be completed.

The percentage of Blacks now in the United States armed forces is larger than the percentage of Blacks (13.3 percent) in the general population. In 2018, 29.22 percent of active-duty enlisted female personnel were Black, and 16.82 percent of active-duty enlisted male personnel were Black.<sup>48</sup>

Both George Cerny and Herbert Geiwitz lived to see the integration of the armed forces.

Lt. Colonel Herbert Geiwitz was discharged from the Army in August 1946 after five years of service.<sup>49</sup> He and his wife had three daughters. Herbert Geiwitz was 92 years old when he died on April 13, 1993, in Peoria, Arizona.<sup>50</sup>

Lt. George B. Cerny was discharged from the Army on December 11, 1945. Within five days, he was hired as a field man for Midland Cooperative Wholesale in Minneapolis.<sup>51</sup> Cerny worked for Midland for 25 years before moving to Chicago for a position with the Co-operative League of the United States. Later he worked for the United States Justice Department in the Community Relations Service. In 1974, that job took him to Dallas, Texas, where he was a conciliator who assisted in resolving racial conflicts in a five-state area. He retired in 1984.<sup>52</sup>

George Cerny died of a cerebral hemorrhage on February 20, 1999, in St. Mary's Hospital, Rochester, Minnesota, after a fall. He was 86 years old. Cerny was survived by two daughters, 11 grandchildren, and eight great-grandchildren.<sup>53</sup>

In his obituary, George Cerny was described as a person who filled his life with work that supported his ideals---"the dignity and basic goodness of all humanity, the benefits of education continuing throughout life, the alleviation of suffering, prejudice, and injustice, the support of democracy through grassroot (sic) action, the promotion of peace as a way of life."<sup>54</sup>

These were necessary qualities for a citizen soldier who was called on to lead men who had lived with prejudice and injustice most of their lives, and it is a fitting epitaph for the life of anyone.

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