

# Stay on the Ball



## Stay on the Ball

### Introduction

In World War II, over 2.5 million African-American men were registered for the draft and one million served as draftees or volunteers in all of the branches of the armed forces. During World War II, Black women entered the armed forces in small but significant numbers. In addition more than 600,000 African American women took advantage of wartime employment opportunities.

### Standards

#### **RI K-12 GSEs for Civics & Government and Historical Perspectives/RI History**

#### **High School Proficiency Grades 9-12**

#### **HP 1: History is an account of human activities that is interpretive in nature.**

##### **HP 1–1 Students *act as historians*, using a variety of tools (e.g., artifacts and primary and secondary sources) by...**

- a. formulating historical questions, obtaining, analyzing, evaluating historical primary and secondary print and non-print sources
- b. explaining how historical facts and historical interpretations may be different, but are related
- c. identifying, describing, or analyzing multiple perspectives on an historical trend or event

##### **HP 1–2: Students interpret history as a series of connected events with multiple cause-effect relationships, by**

- a. explaining cause and effect relationships in order to sequence and summarize events, make connections between a series of events, or compare/contrast events
- b. interpreting and constructing visual data (e.g., timelines, charts, graphs, flowchart, historical films, political cartoons) in order to explain historical continuity and change
- c.

##### **HP 2: History is a chronicle of human activities, diverse people, and the societies they form**

##### **HP 2– 1: Students connect the past with the present by**

- a. explaining origins of major historical events
- b. identifying and linking key ideas and concepts and their enduring implications
- c. analyzing and evaluating how national and world events have impacted Rhode Island and how Rhode Island has impacted national and world events

##### **HP 2 – 2: Students chronicle events and conditions by...**

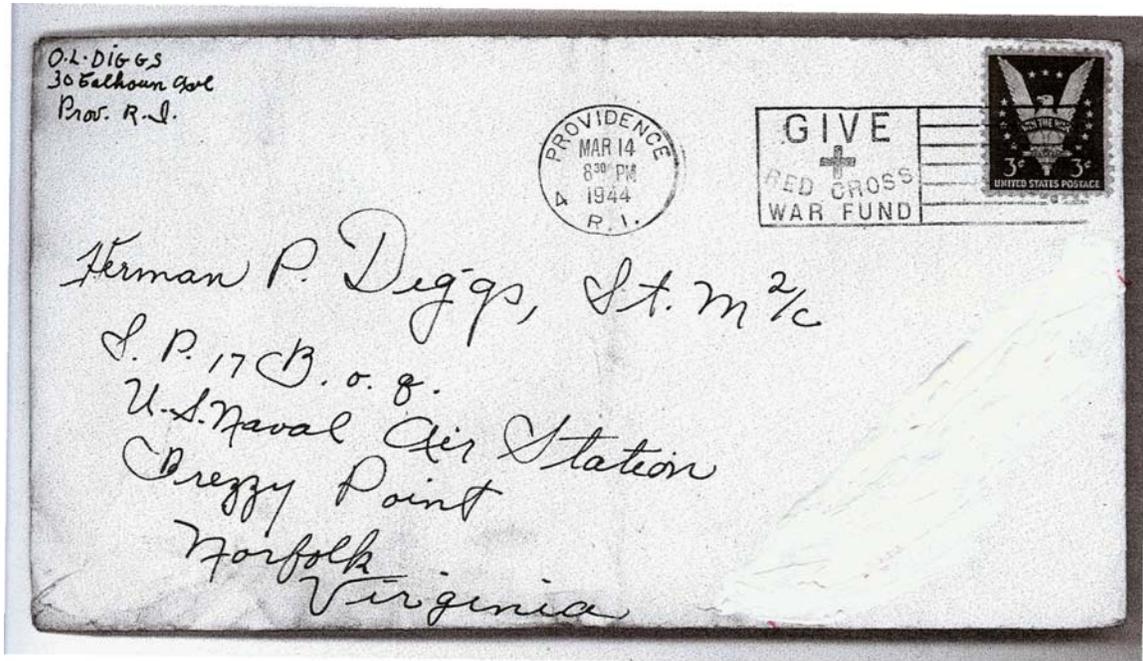
- a. creating narratives based on a particular historical point of view
- b. synthesizing information from multiple sources to formulate an historical interpretation

##### **HP 2– 3: Students show understanding of change over time by...**

- a. tracing patterns chronologically in history to describe changes on domestic, social, or economic life
- b. documenting various groups and their traditions that have remained constant over time

## Stay on the Ball

Letters were the main form of communication for soldiers and their loved ones. This first group of lessons focuses on a Rhode Island couple, Herman P. and Ostena (Teena) Diggs. It is based on personal and intimate letters that were written by Ostena who was living at home in Providence, Rhode Island to Herman who was stationed stateside in Norfolk, Virginia. The letters were written over several months in 1944. They are love letters, but they also reflect everyday life including issues of race and ethnicity.



Document #1

Take a few minutes to look at this envelope. We can learn a great deal from a simple envelope.

1. What do we know about the writer?
2. What do we know about the recipient of the letter?
3. The postmark helps to authenticate the contents of the envelope, how?
4. Patriotism and the war effort was important at this time, how does the letter exemplify the war effort?

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On the following pages there is a transcription of a typical letter that Teena Diggs wrote to her husband Herman Digg. The letter covers a range of topics from the weather to the question of race.

*Monday, March 20, 1944, Time 5:50 P.M.  
(First day of Spring)*

*My Own Dear Hermie,*

*I wrote you in the letter Sunday that the 21<sup>st</sup> was the first day of spring, but I was mistaken, it is a day earlier this year, and we have six inches of snow and it is still snowing. But it won't last long, but March always does something different.*

*How are you today, received the letter you wrote Mickey's Day, and was sorry to hear you had not heard from me but once, but I guess you have got them by now. I have written everyday but Friday, and I didn't when I came home as I had such a bad headache. That makes me mad they say for us to write, but they don't give the boys the mail after we do write. ....*

*Sorry to hear that your knees are bothering you, but you used to have such bad cramps in your legs, I was afraid they would bother you more as you grow older.....I didn't go up to mothers for dinner yesterday, I just didn't feel like it so I taken it easy. I walked up this evening for a few minutes. But your little knocked knee wife hasn't felt toooo scruptious, a cough has bothered me. So when I am too tired I rest myself as I feel that I must go to work if nothing else. But don't you worry about me,*

## **Stay on the Ball**

*I will take care of myself, and I am still taking my Fathers John.*

*You must have felt like giving that guy or I should say Cracker a poke in the nose, when he said he hated the Yankees. You should have said yes and I hate you D Southerners too. You see there will always be that feeling, both among the white and colored, I don't think it will ever die out.*

*Well never mind honey I love you so we will just stick with each other and let the rest of the folks straighten out that mess.*

*Someone over the radio said the war would last 2 more months, I hope it is true, but I don't dare to get my hopes up toooooo high, because, some one else will come along and say it will last 2 more years. They don't know I guess. But I do know that some glad day this lump that is and has been in my throat since you went away, will melt away, and the one man in my life will come home to stay with me forever. You will come home to me, to make me laugh away that awful tight feeling that has become part me. All I can say is that I love you honey and always will, and will keep myself just for you. I am just going to hold you tight for always and always, and we will be like two love birds the rest of our lives.*

*Well be a good boy and stay on the ball,  
With all my love + Your loving wife+XxTeenaxxxXXX*

Grades 9-12

## Stay on the Ball

### Graphic Organizer

The letter covers a range of topics from the weather to the question of race. Please fill in the graphic organizer giving examples from letter on each topic.

Date & time of the letter	
Number and frequency of letters	
Hermans health	
Teena's health	
North- South relations	
Race	
Length of War	
Fear	
Faithfulness	
Love	

## **Stay on the Ball**

Documents 3 & 4 are excerpts from letters written by Teena Diggs to her husband Herman Diggs. (Transcriptions)

*Saturday, February 26, 1944, Time 8:15 A. M.*

*.....Maxine Carllon Ingram is working up there now. She is pasting downstairs. Isn't it funny how white some people try to be they have to work with colored folks just the same. But she wasn't as bad as the rest, because she married Morriss and she seemed to think a lot of him, she still wears his ring. But the rest didn't like him because he was too dark. The old soaks. This color question makes me sick.*

*Laddie and Pal have been out and had a good play this morning came in with their tongues hanging out all out of breath had a little scrap when they came in so I put or made Pal go in the corner by the refrigerator and put a chair up under the sink and he can't get out. That is his punishment. You see he is a dog you can not whip or it only makes him worse.....*

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Herman was in the U.S. Navy. In 1942 President Franklin D. Roosevelt and various civil rights organizations forced the Navy to start recruiting African Americans. Since the policy of segregation remained in place, African Americans never made up more than five percent of the entire navy.

*Saturday, March 20, 1944, Time 5:50 P.M.*

*.....Those officers make me sick as low as they are, always wanting to do a decent colored fellow out of something. They think every colored person is like the majority they come in contact with. You are not afraid of them and just let them see you wasn't dumb. That is the way I like to see you do, stand up to those S. B. Charlies and don't back down. I hope this mess gets over soon so you can come home here where the air is free and a little purer than down in that Hell Hole. That I carry on for you at this end, because I know it is not easy for you down there. He had a nerve telling you that you hadn't been there long enough.*

## Stay on the Ball

A number of words and phrases were used in these letters that are no longer part of our current usage. They may be simply dated, they may have more than one meaning or may even be considered “politically incorrect.” If you have found other words that are unfamiliar to you in your reading, include them in this list.

What do you think the words or phrases mean? It is helpful if you look at how the word or phrase is used in the context of the letters.

cracker
colored fellow
Fathers John
stay on the ball
Yankees
Mickey's Day

## Stay on the Ball

### Document Analysis Questions

The following questions are based on Documents #3 & #4. Answer the questions in at least 3-4 complete sentences and include evidence from the documents.

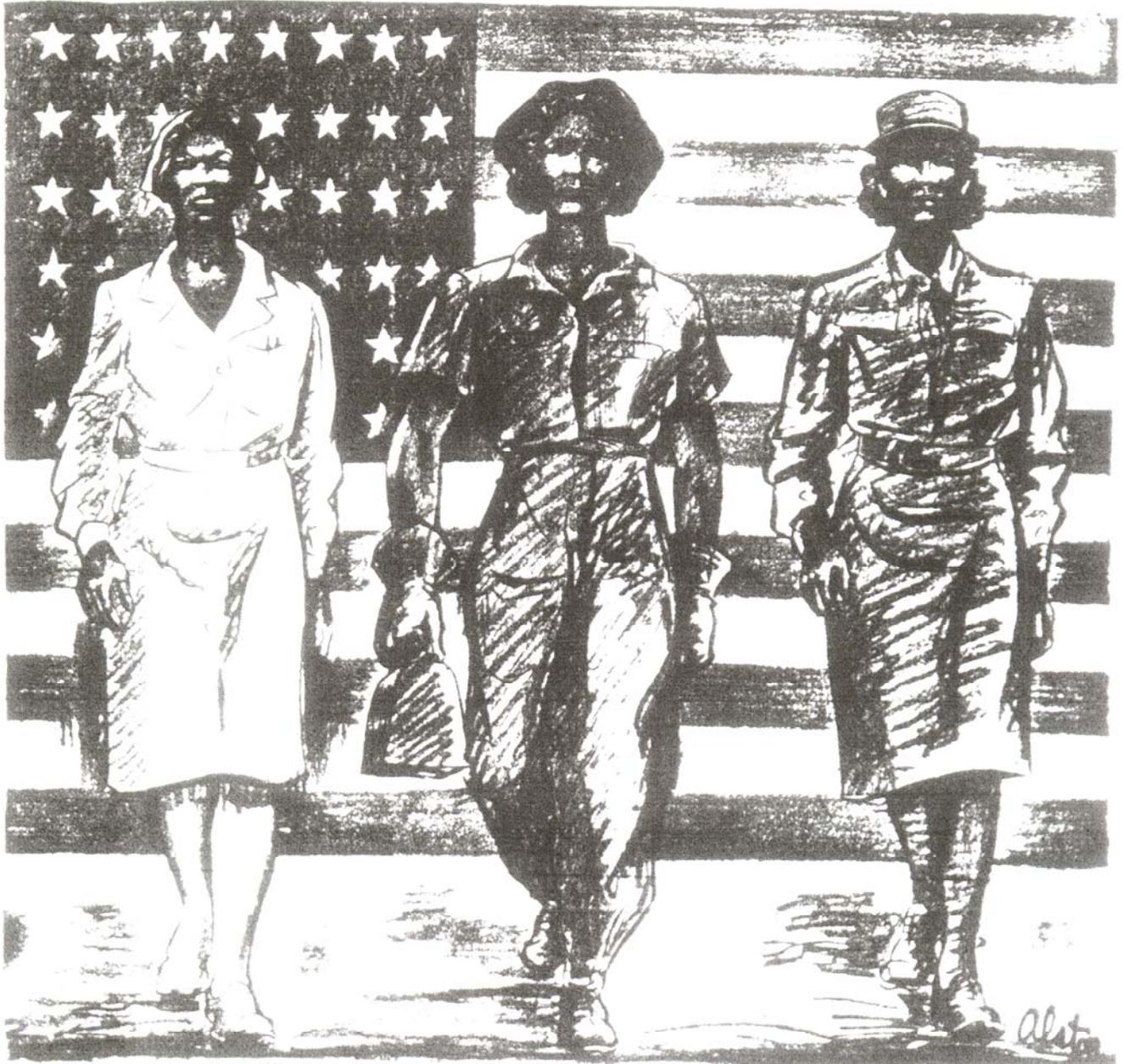
1. Teena states that some people try to “act white.” Finally she says *this color question makes me sick*. This “color question” could refer to a number of situations, what does she mean in this instance?
2. In her letters Teena tries express a feeling of home by including everyday topics, as is evident in document #3. Give an example.
3. How does Teena feel about the officers and their treatment of Herman? What is her advice?
4. Teena seems to make a comparison of the North to the South, although she does not actually use North or South. Explain?

Grades 9-12

## Stay on the Ball

*Providence Chronicle*

September 26, 1942



"THEY ALSO SERVE"

Document #5



## Stay on the Ball

### DBQ Questions

Choose one of the following:

1. All of the letters were written by Teena to Herman. Write a letter *to* Teena from Herman. Base your letter on information from her letters, as well as the cartoon and your prior knowledge of the era. Be sure to express your feelings and try to use some of the words and phrases she uses in her letters.
2. Teena and Herman never had children, but imagine if they did and there were grandchildren and great grand children. Write a letter from Teena or Herman to a great grandchild living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, explaining some of the difficulties that they faced in 1944. Be sure to include examples from the letters, as well as the image and your prior knowledge.