

# “An Officer of Admirable Courage”: Aaron Fisher, Indiana’s Most Highly Decorated Black Soldier of World War I

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Many individual Hoosiers would contribute to their country’s war efforts during WWI. One such contribution, however, has gone mostly unnoticed. Only a handful of Hoosiers have gained the honor of receiving the nation’s second highest award for military valor—the Distinguished Service Cross (DSC). The award is an extremely prestigious one, rarely given. The standard for the recipient demands that “the act or acts of heroism must be so notable and have involved risk of life so extraordinary as to set the individual apart from his or her comrades.” (1)

One of the more interesting stories concerning an Indiana native receiving this major award involves Aaron Fisher, a courageous soldier from Lyles Station in Gibson County near Princeton, Indiana. His DSC citation noted that in fierce combat Fisher “showed exceptional bravery in action when his position was raided by superior forces of the enemy by directing his men and refusing to leave his position, although he was severely wounded.” The citation for Fisher’s *Croix de Guerre with Gold Star*, a major French military award for the same action which brought Fisher the Distinguished Service Cross, called the Indiana soldier “an officer of admirable courage.” (2) Fisher also received

the Purple Heart medal for his grave wounds.

Fisher's military awards are especially interesting and remarkable given the fact that the American army was completely segregated at the time and black American soldiers were almost always assigned non-combat roles, primarily those involving stevedore, transportation, and quartermaster units.

(3) A number of these stalwart black Americans serving during WWI, when allowed to fight, would receive high recognition for their courage—none more than Aaron Fisher. Arville Funk has pointed out, however, that Aaron Fisher “has been forgotten in the military history of the Hoosier state,” although he was “without a doubt . . . the most outstanding black soldier from our state in World War I.” (4) Examining Fisher's bravery, both in its larger context and in detail, may serve to enhance his story, and bring to him the recognition he deserves.

WWI had erupted in August of 1914, but President Woodrow Wilson, influenced by a strong national isolationist streak, initially kept the country out of the war. That status changed as German U-boats sank ships on the high seas with American citizens on board and Germany secretly negotiated with Mexico, encouraging that country to disrupt our southern border. The United States eventually declared against Germany in early 1917, but American troops would not see combat on the front lines for some months. (5) Meanwhile,

German military leadership, in an attempt to break the static trench warfare, had innovated a number of new tactics, including the use of small elite shock groups of heavily armed Germans—storm troopers. These fierce raiders favored trench knives, pistols, short barreled guns, sharpened shovels, and grenades. They employed speed, surprise, and ferocity in their attacks, looking to secure prisoners for interrogation and to spread terror among their foes. (6) The first American casualties would fall prey to such a unit. One of the American dead, James Gresham, was considered to be the first American casualty of the war. Like Aaron Fisher, Gresham had Gibson County Indiana connections. The story of his fate suggests the visceral horrors Aaron Fisher would soon face in combat.

November 3, 1917, had turned into a miserable rain-soaked day in one particular section of the static trench fighting in northern France. To make matters worse, the wind lent a bitter edge to the gloomy evening. Over two hundred men of Company F, of the 16<sup>th</sup> Infantry huddled in muddy trench systems, trying to stay warm. American troops had only been at the front for two months, and had yet to experience combat. Company F members, however, could look into the darkness, across no man's land, and know that the heavily fortified German lines were only a few hundred yards away.

Squad leader James Gresham's small unit guarded an especially

vulnerable portion of a forward trench line. Perhaps, as he sat in the eerie darkness, the homesick Gresham thought about his childhood years in Gibson County Indiana, in the county seat of Princeton, where his mother ran a restaurant and small hotel. Meanwhile, German troops, who had been keenly aware of their new neighbors, plotted to deliver a calling card of sorts to these fresh American soldiers.

As the November evening wore on, James Gresham nervously rested in a darkened soggy dugout, waiting for the cold rain to stop. Suddenly, a hellish enemy barrage of artillery erupted, cutting the novice American soldiers off from reinforcements. The bombardment was quickly followed by an attack of elite German shock troops. Gresham came running from a dugout during the assault and shouted to a German soldier dressed in an American uniform, telling him that he was an American and not to shoot. The German raider shot him through the eye. Another American casualty who died soon after James Gresham had his throat cut. (7)

Aaron Fisher's journey toward his own rendezvous with fierce combat, and his exceptional courage when facing the challenge, can perhaps be best understood by looking at his earlier life. The Lyles Station, Indiana community that Aaron Fisher was born into was one of the first and most stable of a handful of rural black settlements in the state. Founded in the 1840s by

Joshua Lyles, Lyles Station soon came to host a number of free blacks and escaped slaves who worked the fertile fields that lay not far from the White and Wabash Rivers in their attempt to gain the American dream. (8) Eventually, many of the people in the area came to be prosperous farmers. Some of the original Lyles brothers had already proven their heart and bravery in the surrounding white dominated world when five Lyles brothers defeated a mob army of one hundred and fifty whites in nearby Vanderburgh County in the late 1850s. (9) Hoosier historian Emma Lou Thronbrough called the attack on the Lyles family, “The most notorious outbreak of mob violence” in Indiana prior to the Civil War. (10) The Lyles brothers’ hard fought and fearless victory even drew a positive response from the region’s leading newspaper, the *Evansville Daily Enquirer*, which reported the men had “defended themselves nobly. They did their duty to their homes and their families and the scars that some [of their attackers] will carry to their graves will bear witness that they were not defenseless.” (11) That same strength and spirit existed in Aaron Fisher’s father, Benjamin Fisher, who had served in the Union Army during the Civil War, as did several other Lyles Station men.

The civic minded black community of the Lyles Station area would also come forth to serve during the brief Spanish American War in 1898. The local paper carried two pieces about these men, one noting, “The colored people of

Princeton and vicinity do not propose to be behind other places in the matter of showing their readiness to engage in the Hispano-American scrap. A company of volunteers has been recruited and will be ready for the second call of the president.” The following were elected officers of the company at a meeting Friday night according to the paper: John Mackey, captain; John Strange, 1<sup>st</sup> lieutenant; Abe Head, 2nd lieutenant; John Hardeman, Jim Owens, Eugene Ferguson, James Dunville, S.F. Kirkpatrick, sergeants; W.H. Alvis, Albert Wiggins, J.W.H. McDonald, W.W. Guthrie, Luther Berry, corporals. Other blacks who served in the war from the Princeton area were Frank Hopkins, J. Columbus Russell, Samuel Anderson, Will Greer, Robert Hardiman, Clarence Hardiman, and James T. Cole. (12)

While not exactly idyllic, the world Aaron Fisher was born to on May 14, 1892, was a more stable environment than most Hoosier blacks knew at the turn of the century. Aaron’s parents were Benjamin and Mary Octiva (Barnhill) Fisher, a hard working farm couple who lived in the Lyles Station area. Aaron Fisher would come to know a rural life of hard work, tempered by such joys of outdoor living as camping, hunting, fishing, using firearms, and horseback riding. The community had a particularly strong elementary school which young Fisher attended. There at the Lyles Station School, Fisher would come to know many friends and find a healthy social and intellectual structure to

compliment his outdoor and farming experiences. Tragedy, however, struck young Fisher at an early age. He was ten years old when his beloved mother, Mary Octivia, died. His father soon remarried, further rocking the young child's world. (13)

After graduating from the Lyles grade school, Fisher attended the nearby all black Lincoln High School in Princeton. The city had a fair number of black citizens who had come over from Lyles Station to live. Many of them congregated on the town's north east section. For whatever reason, young Fisher did not return his junior year to school but rather began working with his father on the farm. It was a hard but rewarding life style for those who love to work the soil. But Aaron Fisher quickly discovered he did not want to live the life of a farmer.

In 1911, at the age of eighteen, Fisher joined the U.S. Army. Nineteen sixteen found Fisher serving with an American Army unit called the Mexican Punitive Expedition, chasing Poncho Villa south of the border. It was during this time, and during his training to prepare troops for fighting in WWI, that Aaron Fisher would have witnessed several shocking episodes of American bigotry in U. S. army camp. (14) In August of 1917, an ugly race riot at one of these camps in Texas led to the execution of thirteen American Black troops. The segregated attitude at this time was further suggested in Aaron Fisher's

own neck of the woods by how WWI Gibson County Indiana draftees were listed in the local papers. "Colored men to go," was a category found at the end of the initial listings of white males drafted. (15) Despite these kinds of events, and the overall discrimination that black Americans often faced at this time, black American men in great numbers stepped forward to serve their country.

In May of 1918, the 92<sup>nd</sup> and 93<sup>rd</sup> Divisions, made up of American black troops, were ordered oversea. By late August, the 92<sup>nd</sup>, including Aaron Fisher's unit, was moved up to the St. Die sector of the main battle line. Normally, this section was a rather quiet one, but the recent taking of a local strategic village from the Germans had incited the latter group to step up attacks on the Americans. German troops observed with much interest the arrival of these fresh-to-the-lines black troops and quickly planned to test the mettle of the novice Americans. Fierce German probes and raids soon came at vulnerable points all along the line the black troops manned on an almost nightly basis. The enemy especially sought out lightly manned positions at points in the line which were farthest away from reinforcements.

On September 3, 1918, Lt. Aaron Fisher, perhaps because of his earlier experiences in America's Mexican expedition, was given charge over a small number of men at an exposed trench outpost. Fisher worried about the precariousness of the position and about how his young untested charges



might hold up to an attack. He could only hope they would not be tested so soon. The situation, however, was exactly the kind of vulnerable target for which the German's sought. After a heavy artillery barrage which cut off the undermanned position, fifty German raiders fell upon the seven man outpost that Lt. Aaron Fisher commanded. Given the element of surprise and their superior numbers, the Germans likely believed they would make quick and bloody work of the small group of black American soldiers.

The raid erupted like an unexpected and deafening volcanic explosion. Screaming German soldiers threw themselves at the line, hurling grenades and firing weapons. They moved quickly to try and get into the American trenches. In the sudden chaos, Lt. Fisher's cool decisive response calmed his men as he directed them in the fight. Then, as the furious melee continued, the gallant lieutenant sudden received a severely wound that sent him to the ground.

The small band of black Americans under Fisher found themselves rocked by their leader's wounding. Then, to their amazement, they watched as Fisher, ignoring tremendous pain, directed his men to stand and fight. When reinforcements finally arrived, the wounded lieutenant crawled outside the safety of his post to lead an assault until the [enemy] was beaten off by the "counter attack." (16)

When the deadly fighting had finally ceased, U. S. officers stood amazed

at the number of enemy casualties the small and heavily outgunned American unit had inflicted. Half the German attackers lay dead. Aaron Fisher's heroic part in the fight drew special attention and the officers in charge quickly recommended him for recognition.

Aaron Fisher would stay in the United States Army until medical problems forced him to retire in 1947. He had been discharged in 1919 as an officer, but reenlisted as a first sergeant. Two years later he achieved the position of warrant officer. His promotion to chief warrant officer occurred in 1942, a grade he would keep until discharged. From 1936, until his retirement, Aaron Fisher served in the R. O. T. C. program at Wilberforce University in Ohio. (17)

During WWI, over 400,000 black Americans would serve their country. Among the two divisions sent overseas, there would be over 5,000 killed or wounded and this despite the fact black troops were often kept away from the front line fighting. Many of these men would receive recognition for valor in combat. For his own efforts, Aaron Fisher would receive our nation's second highest military honor for valor, the Distinguished Service Cross, as well as France's higher honor—the Croix de Guerre with Gold Star—and the Purple Heart. In receiving these honors, Fisher became the highest decorated black soldier from Indiana during World War I. The black Princeton community

would also see three of its young men giving their lives in World War I, one of them in combat—Oscar Lawrence, killed in action on October, 10, 1918, not long after Fisher had fought for survival in the desperate German trench raid—along with Howard Hardiman, and Samuel Carter. (18) Thirty-year-old Lawrence was Aaron Fisher’s step brother.

The loss of these three black Gibson County sons in a war supposedly to make the world safe for democracy was surely a bitter one for many black Americans living in segregated Princeton. One episode speaks to those difficult times. On July 19, 1918, a little less than two months before Fisher’s courageous actions, Gibson County native Adolph “Dolph” Wood, and three other marines, charged a German machine gun nest and overran the position. For this action, Wood also received the Distinguished Service Cross. A local Gibson County paper carried a detailed front page story about Wood’s award in October of that year, relating that General John Pershing personally awarded the medal to the Gibson County man. (20) Fisher’s own heroism was not recognized until late December of 1920, with the local paper noting in a very short piece on a back page, “Colored Soldier among Heroes.” (21) Oddly, the article only acknowledged Fisher’s French award, the Croix de Guerre with Gold Star, without offering any details about the nature of the Gibson County man’s heroics or mentioning his Distinguished Service Cross award and Purple

Heart.

There was one last discovery of significance in this research—a letter to Wilberforce University Alumni, published in November of 1982, calling on the Wilberforce University community to pledge to an Aaron Fisher Tribute Fund. Earlier pieces on the Aaron Fisher story suggested he had died shortly after his retirement from the army in 1947. Apparently, this was not so. The letter shows that Fisher had also obtained the rank of captain in the reserves. Fisher had great influence over the young men with whom he worked. John R. Fox, one of Fisher’s ROTC students at Wilberforce, for example, would himself receive the Medal of Honor for his actions in WWII.

In part, the alumni letter reads: “Captain Fisher was a World War I hero and from 1936 to 1947, an outstanding ROTC instructor at the university. During that time he greatly influenced the future military and professional careers of the young men with whom he came in contact. Most are still grateful for his constructive guidance. Although presently experiencing some health issues, he remains a gallant fighter and solid citizen. Retired from the military and public service, ‘Cap’ and his wife, Mary, reside in Xenia, Ohio. Both are active in civic and social affairs.” (22) The brave ex-soldier would have been ninety-years-old at this time.

Indiana has provided its share of service men and women to our

country's war efforts. More than a few of these would go on to receive recognition for valor in combat. Few would be more forgotten than Aaron Fisher. His story of fortitude and courage, both in facing combat and in dealing with the discrimination of that day begs to not only be told, but recognized in some more significant way.

## Notes

1. Distinguished Service Cross: Criteria.  
<http://www.gruntsmilitary.comdsc.shtml>. Retrieved from the internet 7/31/2011.
2. Aaron Richard Fisher citations, Harry Rider, Ed., *Indiana Book of Merit*. Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau, 1932, 239-240.
3. Emmett. J. Scott, *The American Negro in the World War*. Homewood Press, 1919.
4. Arville L. Funk, "Lt. Aaron R. Fisher- Hoosier Hero." *Black History News and Notes*, Vol. 83, March 1987, 6.
5. Meirion and Susie Harries, *The Last Days of Innocence: America at War, 1917-1918*. New York: Random House, 1997.
6. Ian Drury, *German Stormtroopers, 1914-1918*. London: Osprey, 1996.
7. Meirion and Susie Harries, *The Last Days of Innocence*, 3-5.
8. Carl C. Lyles, Sr., *Lyles Station, Indiana, Yesterday and Today*. Evansville, Indiana: Burkert Walton, 1984.
9. Randy Mills, "They Defended Themselves Nobly: A Story of African American Empowerment in Antebellum America." *Black History News and Notes*. Volume 101, October 2005.
10. Emma Lou Thronbrough, *The Negro in Indiana: A Study of a Minority*. Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau, 1957, 130-131.
11. *Evansville (Indiana) Daily Enquirer*, August, 2, 1857.
12. *Princeton (Indiana) Clarion*
13. Arville L. Funk, *Lt. Aaron R. Fisher- Hoosier Hero*
14. Emmett. J. Scott, *The American Negro in the World War*.
15. See *Princeton Clarion* and *Oakland City Journal*.
16. Aaron Richard Fisher citations, Harry Rider, Ed., *Indiana Book of*

*Merit.*

17. Arville L. Funk, *Lt. Aaron R. Fisher- Hoosier Hero*
18. *Indiana World War Records: Gold Star Honor Role*. Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Commission, 1921, 194-196.
19. *Oakland City Journal*, October 1, 1918.
20. *Princeton Clarion*
21. *Ibid.*
22. The Aaron Fisher Tribute Fund letter is in the possession of the Ohio Historical Society. A digital copy is available on their website.