BLACK AMERICA AND HOLLYWOOD’S KOREAN WAR: THE STEEL HELMET (1951) AND PORK CHOP HILL (1959)

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Representing neither the glory of World War II, nor the anguish of the Vietnam War, the Korean War continues to occupy an obscure place in American history and culture. Similarly, those who fought in this conflict – including African Americans – have been overshadowed by the combatants who served before and after. Yet the Korean War was enormously significant, not least because it was the first conflict fought by a racially integrated American fighting force. For the first time, black and white soldiers ate, slept, and fought side by side. Films about the Korean War made during the 1950s explored this new racial dynamic. Focusing on the representation of African Americans in The Steel Helmet (1951) and Pork Chop Hill (1959), this article examines the ways in which screen representations both reflected and challenged popular attitudes regarding African American military service during the Korean War.

The Korean War occupies an ambiguous place in American cultural memory. Positioned between the United States’ triumph in World War Two, when the nation united to fight enemies deemed treacherous and evil, and the harrowing history of the US’ failed attempt to thwart Vietnamese nationalism, the conflict that raged on the Korean Peninsula from 1950 to 1953 remains an often-overlooked part of the history of American globalism. Whether measured by the number of scholarly or popular accounts of the war, or by its impact on political discourse, the Korean War remains in the shadows of those conflicts that came before and after.
after. If World War Two was the ‘last good war’, and Vietnam ‘the wrong war’, the so-called ‘police action’ in Korea soon became the ‘forgotten war’.

For African Americans who participated in this conflict, this historical amnesia is even more vexing. Not only did an estimated 400,000 African Americans serve in the Korean War, but 5,000 gave their lives in what proved to be a very hot moment in their nation’s Cold War crusade against monolithic communism.\(^1\) When North Korean forces stormed across the 38th parallel on 25 June 1950, the desegregation of the US armed forces initiated by President Harry Truman in 1948 was still a work in progress. For many black and white Americans, this was not only the first war in which they fought side by side, but was also the first time they ate, slept and lived with those of another race. While African American soldiers hoped, again, that answering the call to serve their country in war would demonstrate that they were worthy and deserving of equal rights at home, they would be disappointed. Compounding that disappointment, African Americans who served in Korea were often cast as cowardly and unmanly – and hence unworthy of their civil and political rights as citizen soldiers.

The story of the 24th Infantry Regiment – the last substantial segregated infantry unit in the US Army – is key to understanding the critical rendering of African American participation in the Korean War. Hastily deployed to Korea in the wake of the communist attack, the regiment’s recapture of the town of Yechon in July 1950 delivered the first victory for US forces in the Korean War – and, briefly, a wave of positive publicity for African American servicemen. That triumph, however, was soon overshadowed by reports that the men of the regiment were repeatedly buckling in the face of North Korean attacks. Soon, the 24th was being derided as the ‘Runnin’ 24th’, or the ‘Bugout Brigade’.\(^2\)

For many white Americans their assumptions of black cowardice, or even black disloyalty, were confirmed by the October 1950 court martial and conviction of Lieutenant Leon Gilbert, an African American officer found guilty of refusing a direct order to return to the field of battle. Eleven years later, in 1961, the US Army’s official history of the Korean War contended that the easily panicked men of the 24th Infantry had frequently abandoned ‘their positions and straggled to the rear’.\(^3\) Recognizing what was at stake on the Korean battlefields, and realizing they were being used as a ‘scapegoat’ for the wider failings of the US and United Nations armies, the much-maligned black soldiers of the 24th Infantry Regiment would spend the next five decades fighting to restore their tarnished reputation.\(^4\)

This struggle over the memory of the African American contribution to the Korean War was a cultural as well as a political contest. Focusing on the representation of African Americans in two films – *The Steel Helmet* (1951) and *Pork Chop Hill* (1959) – this article explores how these screen representations both reflected and challenged popular attitudes toward African American military service during the Korean War.

Written, directed and produced by Samuel Fuller, *The Steel Helmet* (1951) was Hollywood’s first confrontation with the racial divisions surrounding the African American military contribution in Korea. A Jewish American, Fuller served in North Africa and Europe for three years during World War II. His wartime experiences profoundly shaped his art. Intend on depicting the insanity, rather than the
glory of war, the iconoclastic Fuller built a reputation for low budget and often controversial films.\(^5\) While *The Steel Helmet* was not Fuller’s first film — he had previously written and directed *I Shot Jesse James* (1949) and *The Baron of Arizona* (1950) — it was his first war film, and the movie that effectively launched his career. *The Steel Helmet* was, as Lee Server has noted, a ‘sensation that no one in Hollywood could ignore’.\(^6\)

Having earlier worked as a crime reporter for the *New York Evening Graphic*, Fuller was drawn to the subject of the Korean ‘police action’ by newspaper reports during the early months of the conflict. To Fuller, the situation in Korea was not unique, but rather a current iteration of a timeless concept: ‘Whatever the confrontation and wherever it’s happening,’ he recalled, ‘the underlying story is one of destruction and hatred’.\(^7\) Fuller’s own war experience profoundly impacted his films, particularly *The Steel Helmet*. Indeed, Fuller had begun conceptualising the storyline of *The Steel Helmet* during his service as an infantryman in World War II, planning it out in his war journal in September 1943.\(^8\) Although his journal set the original story in Italy, the enduring messages Fuller aimed to convey were just as true for the Korean War as they were for World War II. Fuller regarded *The Steel Helmet* as ‘an opportunity to show audiences that war was more complex than the front-page newspaper articles. You never saw the genuine hardship of soldiers, not ours nor the enemy’s, in movies.’ Fuller wanted to portray the reality of war — the ‘confusion and brutality’ — rather than the ‘phony heroism’ often depicted in war films.\(^9\)

Highlighting his commitment to an authentic depiction of war, in making *The Steel Helmet* Fuller opted for an antihero protagonist and a cast of unknown actors. When a major studio offered to take on *The Steel Helmet* and cast John Wayne as the main character, Fuller rejected their offer. Determined to make his film ‘look real’, and his characters both ‘human’ and ‘deeply flawed’, Fuller believed Wayne’s presence would make *The Steel Helmet* too ‘gung ho’. Convinced that casting Wayne would reduce his film to ‘a simplistic morality tale’, Fuller’s determination to present the nuances and contradictions of the human condition not only meant he became known as the only director to refuse to cast Wayne, but also ensured *The Steel Helmet* diverged sharply from the typical World War II films produced during the late 1940s and early 1950s.\(^10\) Rather than portray a group of soldiers trudging towards a mutual objective, as was typical of many of the films being made about World War II, *The Steel Helmet* relates the story of a gruff and morally flawed sergeant surrounded by a ‘marginally cohesive and makeshift’ group thrown together by unlucky circumstance rather than drawn together by a common purpose.\(^11\) Their military objectives, aside from survival, are vague. While there are moments in *The Steel Helmet* that highlight the tension, excitement and violence of war, the movie’s focus on those periods between combat allows for intentional dialogue and revealing interactions between the soldiers.

Filmed over a period of ten days in October 1950 — that is, at the very same time as the American public was being regaled with reports of black military ineptitude in Korea — and released on 31 January 1951, *The Steel Helmet* was the first American film made about the Korean War.\(^12\) Produced on a budget of just $104,000, and filmed in Griffith Park in Los Angeles with only 25 cast members,
mostly university students, Fuller’s film was a glimpse into the Korean War as it was taking place. Indeed, although *The Steel Helmet* was informed by Fuller’s experiences during World War II, and while he was reflecting on themes that transcended the specific context of the war in Korea, the context was unambiguously contemporary. Believing that war exposed fundamental truths about the human condition and character, Fuller used *The Steel Helmet* to reflect on issues of racial and national identity amid the hyper-patriotism of Cold War America. With a storyline that Fuller described as ‘torn from the headlines’, *The Steel Helmet* confronts the complex, contentious racial issues arising from American intervention in Korea. Through its representation of a racially and culturally diverse group of American soldiers, the film stands as an early, notable counter to the rumours and innuendo of African American timidity during the Korean conflict that first surfaced in 1950 and which persisted through subsequent decades.

*The Steel Helmet* is a snapshot of the experiences of a diverse group of American soldiers during the early stages of the Korean War – the ensemble cast allows for a focus on several characters in this film rather than just the protagonist. It begins at the end of a firefight, as the antihero protagonist, a brusque sergeant named Zack, emerges from beneath a steel helmet, apparently the sole survivor of his unit. A World War II ‘re-tread’, Zack soon encounters ‘Short Round’, an orphaned boy who offers to help Zack find his way back to his command post. The rest of the film depicts their journey, and the characters they encounter along the way. Using the framework of this quite ordinary storyline, Fuller delved deeper into the complexities of war.

Traveling through the Korean countryside, Zack and Short Round are joined first by ‘Corporal Thompson’ – an African American medic and the sole survivor of a platoon that had been brutally annihilated by a communist unit – and then by the surviving members of another decimated American platoon. Thompson emerges as a key figure in *The Steel Helmet*, functioning as a voice of multiracial patriotism and a symbol of African American military valour. When Thompson explains that he had been held captive for six hours by communist troops, Zack says: ‘Guess you had plenty of chances to understand how those reds treat you guys’ (meaning black Americans). Thompson’s reply to Zack’s provocation is unambiguous: ‘They hate our guts’. ‘That’s not what Joe Stalin says’, retorts Zack, but Thompson quickly rejects his assumption: ‘Got 15 men out there to prove it’.

A shared, multiracial opposition to communism is thus portrayed as more powerful than communist appeals to African American discontent. Moreover, by depicting Thompson as another World War Two ‘retread’, Fuller presents the black medic as part of the same patriotic military tradition as Zack. Fuller’s characterization of Thompson as a citizen-soldier goes further. Besides being well educated – he studied surgery after World War Two – Thompson’s sense of purpose, along with his composure in the face of danger, directly refuted the images of nervous and militarily-inept African Americans that continued to prevail in many corners of American culture. Recognizing these attributes in Thompson, Zack is respectful of the black medic, treating him as a fellow warrior.
Fuller reiterates this point in subsequent scenes. When Zack, Short Round, and Thompson stumble across another American platoon, that unit’s leading officer interrogates Thompson about his status: ‘What’s your story? Regiment’s been getting a lot of stories about stragglers’. Unperturbed, Thompson calmly and confidently states he is a medic. Declaring ‘I’m not a straggler’, he explains that communist troops had ‘killed every man in my platoon’. With Fuller’s film being made at the same time as the black and white press were covering the court martial of Lieutenant Leon Gilbert and 39 other members of the 24th Regiment, The Steel Helmet was a direct rebuttal of contemporary white narratives regarding African Americans’ lack of combat temperament.

These assumptions of black cowardice were inseparable from a parallel narrative, that cast doubt on black Americans’ loyalty. During a period in which critics of civil rights were quick to denounce the movement’s leaders as communist stooges, singer and actor Paul Robeson’s criticism of the US intervention in Korea, and his advice to African Americans that they should not join the war effort, confirmed the worst fears of many white Americans. By contrast, throughout The Steel Helmet Thompson reiterates the possibilities of a multiracial democracy.

Fuller presents the US Army in Korea as a racially progressive success story. A multicultural group of American soldiers are depicted as eating, sleeping, and chatting together naturally. At one point in the film, Thompson and Zack sleep facing each other with Zack’s arm resting on Thompson’s. The US Army is thereby represented as both an example of, and a vehicle for racial integration. During a key moment in the film, a North Korean prisoner of war (POW) questions why Thompson fights for a nation that continues to deny him his civil rights. ‘I just don’t understand you’, says the North Korean, ‘you can’t eat with them unless there’s a war, even then it’s difficult. Isn’t that so?’ Just as Thompson calmly refuted the suggestion that he was a straggler, he unemotionally tells the North Korean that it is indeed challenging to live as a black person in the US. As he explains, however, his nation’s racial imperfections must be seen in the context of the communist alternative. Rejecting again the notion that communists treated black people fairly, Thompson explains that he has seen many of his African American compatriots die at the hands of the communists. Although he accepts that African Americans are not equal in US society, he is willing to pin his faith in American democracy. Over time, he tells the North Korean, black Americans will achieve equality. Responding to the North Korean’s criticism of African Americans’ segregation to the back of buses, Thompson replies:

That’s right. A hundred years ago I couldn’t even ride a bus. At least now I can sit in the back. Maybe in 50 years, sit in the middle, someday even up front. There’s some things you can’t rush, Buster.

Ostensibly at least, Fuller is thus advocating gradualism as the solution to racial inequality in the US. A similar faith in American racial progress was evident in his depiction of Tanaka, a Japanese American soldier who joins with the other American troops. Like Thompson, Tanaka refuses to be goaded by the North Korean prisoner’s provocations regarding white America’s mistreatment of non-
white minorities – specifically, the US government’s internment of Japanese Americans during World War II:

I’ve got some hot infantry news for you. I’m not a dirty Jap rat, I’m an American. And if we get pushed around back home, well, that’s our business, but we don’t like it when we get pushed around by … eh knock off before I forget the articles of war and slap those rabbit teeth of yours out one at a time.\textsuperscript{18}

Placing national loyalty ahead of their racial identities, Tanaka and Thompson are thus united in their faith in the multiracial American democratic project: the fight for racial equality is unfinished business, but progress is being made. In the final scenes of \textit{The Steel Helmet}, Thompson’s courage under fire presents him as arguably the greatest hero of the film. When one of his comrades is killed, Thompson valiantly takes command of a machine gun and mows down rows of incoming guerillas, thereby demonstrating bravery, a commitment to the American cause, and a masculine, military prowess beyond his medical responsibilities. As the dust clears on this final battle, Thompson and Tanaka – along with Sergeant Zack – are three of the four surviving Americans. There is a mutual respect amongst the soldiers based on their loyalty to both the United States and each individual’s value on the battlefield. Thompson and Tanaka prove themselves to be essential members of the group, and ultimately, survivors.

While Thompson and Tanaka expressed their faith in the US, Fuller was determined to use \textit{The Steel Helmet} to expose the contradictions that continued to underpin American racism. As Lisa Dombrowski has noted, ‘by enabling racial minorities to ask ‘why put your life on the line for a country that has never lived up to its ideals?’, Fuller’s film had gone ‘to the heart of the question’.\textsuperscript{19} As he put it, he was unwilling to ‘back away from confronting racism in America’. Referring to Thompson’s exchanges with the North Korean POW and refusing to pretend that the integration of the military was seamless, he explained that this ‘kind of dialogue, was a slap in people’s face.’\textsuperscript{20}

Similarly, Fuller’s treatment of Tanaka was more provocative than appeared at first blush. As with the black-white division in the US, even raising the question of Japanese American loyalty was contentious. ‘After all’, Fuller affirmed in his memoir, ‘it wasn’t just blacks who were suffering injustices. I wanted to show that other minorities were abused too’. ‘Long before the Nisei internments of Japanese-Americans was general knowledge’, he recalled, ‘I had my characters in \textit{The Steel Helmet} talking about it’.\textsuperscript{21} At several moments during \textit{The Steel Helmet}, Sergeant Zack refers to the Japanese American character Tanaka using racist slurs such as ‘Buddha Head’ and notes that Lieutenant Driscoll will not listen to Tanaka, because his ‘eyes are slanted the wrong way’.

Anticipating a ‘box-office smash’, the cinematically subversive Fuller claimed to be surprised by the cultural storm unleashed by \textit{The Steel Helmet}. While the racial message ostensibly presented in \textit{The Steel Helmet} was conciliatory and integrationist, so contentious were race relations in the United States that even broaching the subject of race could prompt accusations of disloyalty. ‘All hell broke loose’, recalled Fuller. ‘Despite, or maybe because of the controversy’, he wrote, ‘the
film did great business’. But the controversy that almost certainly contributed to the film’s financial success came at a cost to Fuller. Conservative critics labelled him ‘pro-communist’, ‘anti-American’, and a ‘reactionary’ – with some going far as declaring he should be investigated by the Pentagon. Eventually, the Pentagon obliged. As Marsha Gordon has pointed out, censors were alerted to The Steel Helmet’s overt and repeated engagement with ‘home front racial politics, a topic that had only recently and tentatively emerged in studio-made films’. This direct engagement with racial questions was unique for a war film of the period.

Summoned to Washington by military officials, Fuller held his ground in the face of what he described as an ‘inquisition’. According to Fuller, at the start of proceedings, one general suggested that The Steel Helmet ‘looked like communist indoctrination,’ with another officer prodding Fuller regarding the name of the black medic: apparently ‘Thompson’ was code for a ‘clandestine communist worker’ in the United States. Shocked by these accusations, he denied any such intention. Yet, Fuller trod a fine line between his political convictions and commercial imperatives. On the one hand, he claimed to be unrepentant in his critique of ‘the organized insanity of war’. Although he had not intended to touch ‘some raw nerves’, he did not regret doing so. ‘That wasn’t my purpose’, he wrote, ‘but hell, it was a free country, wasn’t it?’ At the same time, however, Fuller was not immune to commercial realities. In the wake of the unexpected success of The Steel Helmet, Fuller accepted the offer of a contract from Twentieth Century-Fox. Significantly, however, this contract came with a condition attached: Fuller would have to tone down his messaging since the studio deemed discussions of race, politics and religion off-limits for his next film, Fixed Bayonets (1951).

The Steel Helmet received largely positive reviews in the white press, with Variety praising the film as ‘a grim, hardhitting tale that is excellently told’. New York Times film critic Bosley Crowther referred to The Steel Helmet as a ‘modest film’ demonstrating not only the ‘ineffectualness in the Korean war’ but also the ‘courage’ and ‘resourcefulness’ of the men fighting there. Notably, Crowther emphasized that Fuller ‘staged an elementary demonstration of democratic principle through the Negro and a Nisei in the patrol. Unfortunately, the texture of this picture, apparent in the staging and the sets, is patently artificial’. Perhaps alluding to Thompson’s assertion of blind loyalty, Crowther contends that the ‘illusion of reality never really comes through, and the consequence is an awareness of “acting” all the time’. Yet while he suggested that the low budget nature of the film ‘brings the whole show down to tangible make-believe’, Crowther singled out James Edwards’ performance as Thompson. Edwards, he wrote, ‘does a job of smooth and dignified performing as the Negro medical man’.

African American critics also commended Edwards’ depiction of Thompson, with one commentator in the Philadelphia Tribune describing The Steel Helmet as a ‘faithful account of the front line fighting in Korea’. Recognizing that Fuller’s film was presenting a positive portrayal of the possibilities of racial integration, the New York Amsterdam News noted that The Steel Helmet ‘hits race prejudice’.

Other African American observers read the film differently, however. Writing in the Los Angeles Sentinel, Joe Harris delivered an emphatic ‘downward thumb’ to The Steel Helmet. Outraged by the film’s message of gradualism, and linking the
Korean conflict to both the Civil War contest over slavery and Cold War’s Red Scare, Harris argued that African Americans should not be expected to patiently acquiesce in the face of continuing racial injustices:

If we are to be ONE BIG HAPPY AMERICAN FAMILY, we can’t be divided in FREEDOM or JUSTICE because a HOUSE DIVIDED AGAINST ITSELF CANNOT STAND … WE fifteen million NEGROES will not be contented to live HALF FREE and HALF SLAVE to the whim of Un-American ideas.  

The ‘Negro population’, wrote Harris, ‘wants better breaks in Hollywood’s scheme of picture making’. Fuller’s attempt to mock the slow pace of racial integration was thus insufficient for Harris. If Fuller’s characters had appeared to place their faith in the redemptive power of American democracy, reviewers of *The Steel Helmet* understood that Thompson’s and Tanaka’s statements were incomplete responses to the complexities and injustices of racial inequality in the United States.


By the late 1950s Milestone was a Hollywood veteran. Best known for his 1930 film *All Quiet on the Western Front* – for which he won the second of his Academy Awards – Milestone’s commitment to authentic portrayals of war was just one of several parallels between he and Fuller. Both men were Jewish and both had military experience, with the Russian-born Milestone having served in the US Army’s Signal Corps during World War I. Both men, too, shared a conviction that – as one of Milestone’s biographers put it – film should ‘not only entertain’ but also ‘convey messages of social importance’. And, just as Fuller’s loyalty was challenged in the wake of the release of *The Steel Helmet*, Milestone’s Russian background, coupled with assumptions regarding some of his films, had earlier prompted investigations into potential leftist leanings. In 1946, he was one of nineteen Hollywood professionals subpoenaed by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) as ‘unfriendly witnesses’. Following a sojourn in Europe during the early 1950s, *Pork Chop Hill* was Milestone’s first film project after his return to the US.

Hoping to convey ‘uncompromising realism’ in *Pork Chop Hill*, Milestone had less control over the film than he envisioned. Rather, the movie’s star, Gregory Peck, was instrumental in shaping the film’s content and politics. As one of the film’s Executive Producers, Peck not only ‘exercised considerable control over’ the film’s screenplay, casting and final editing, but was also responsible for selecting Milestone to direct *Pork Chop Hill*. Even before filming commenced, however, it became clear that Peck’s vision for the film diverged from his director’s plan to present a realistic portrayal of men at war. Starring Peck as the quintessentially heroic commanding officer, Lieutenant Joseph Clemons, *Pork Chop Hill* remains
one of the relative handful of ‘popular’ representations of the Korean War. Made in cooperation with the US Army – the real Lieutenant Joseph Clemons was onsite to advise during filming – *Pork Chop Hill* claims authority from its opening scene: ‘This is a true story … In most cases, not even the names have been changed’. With its gritty, black and white battle scenes, a largely faceless enemy, and flag-waving displays of American determination and resilience under fire, *Pork Chop Hill* can be read as a World War II film set in Korea. The film is distinguished, however, by its representation of a racially integrated American fighting force.

*Pork Chop Hill* relates a two-day fight over a militarily insignificant piece of real estate called Pork Chop Hill in April 1953. Realizing that the war was nearing its end, the soldiers on the ground were reluctant to be sacrificed in what would surely be a costly battle merely for political posturing. The symbolic significance of the Hill, within the context of both the wider Cold War, and the associated debates regarding American masculinity, is starkly apparent. Pork Chop Hill represents a test of the will, loyalty and character of American fighting men. This linkage of military service and masculinity was hardly new, but during the latter half of the 1950s it became a subject of deep concern within and beyond the US armed forces, as the failure to force a decisive victory on the Korean battlefields prompted a widespread critique of American fighting men. For African American soldiers in the newly integrated American military, the implications of the test of masculinity taking place on the battlefields of Korea – and subsequently in cinematic depictions of the conflict – were especially significant.

Three African American soldiers are represented in *Pork Chop Hill*. One of these men, a runner who unflinchingly carries messages between officers in the field, is a support character. However, the representation and juxtaposition of the other two characters reveals much about contemporary perceptions of African American soldiers in Korea. The first is Corporal Jurgen played by James Edwards (who had earlier appeared in *The Steel Helmet* as Corporal Thompson and who would also feature in another Korean War film, *The Manchurian Candidate*, released in 1962). Consistently emanating strength and bravery in the heat of battle, Jurgen is depicted as a leader, who takes charge at critical moments, looks out for his comrades, and – crucially – even asserts authority over white soldiers. Indeed, his reference to an obstinate white soldier as ‘Boy’ is an evocative challenge to the racial nomenclature and hierarchy that continued to characterize black-white relations beyond as well as within the US military. As a static character who never wavers in his soldierly sense of duty, courage or fortitude, Jurgen fits neatly into a heroic narrative reminiscent of World War Two films. Challenging prevailing perceptions of African Americans as weak and ineffectual, Jurgen represents not only the ideal black soldier, but also the ideal American male.

Besides presenting an example of ideal heroic masculinity, Jurgen’s role in *Pork Chop Hill* functions as a foil for Private Franklin. Whereas Jurgen represents an overwhelmingly positive image of the black fighting man in Korea, the characterization of his comrade Private Franklin is more complex. Played by Woody Strode, a trailblazing and well known professional athlete turned actor, Franklin is initially a reluctant and ‘cowardly’ soldier who, after some convincing from his superior officer, Lieutenant Clemons, becomes a hero and a survivor on Pork
At several moments during the film, Franklin illustrates pejorative stereotypes regarding black soldiers – that they panicked and cowered in battle, fled from danger, and failed to fulfill their patriotic duty – which retained wide currency during the late 1950s. During the initial ascent up Pork Chop Hill, for example, Franklin loses his nerve and hides behind a tree stump. When another soldier notices and goes to help, assuming that Franklin is hurt, Franklin shouts, ‘Beat it!’ Seeing Franklin hiding, Lieutenant Clemons pulls him up by the collar and tells him to get up and stay close. Franklin acquiesces and they continue their ascent side by side.

Soon after that incident, Clemons asks Franklin to help a wounded man out of the trench. Once Franklin and his wounded comrade are out of view, Franklin deceitfully capitalizes on the opportunity to escape from danger and starts escorting the wounded man away from the battlefield. Again, Clemons catches Franklin and, conspicuously, places him under the surveillance of Corporal Jurgen. ‘You keep an eye on that man’, Clemons orders. Jurgen is tough on Franklin and keeps him close, offering no special treatment.

Franklin seems angered, even betrayed by Jurgen’s severity, and the two have a heated altercation when Franklin tries to stray. Jurgen jabs at Franklin with his rifle butt, prodding him in the right direction, ‘Hey you!’ he shouts, ‘this way!’ Enraged, Franklin squares up to Jurgen. They face off, staring each other in the eye: ‘Who you staring at?’ growls Franklin. ‘Staring at you’, responds Jurgen, ‘who you think I’m staring at?’ As Franklin grabs Jurgen’s wrist, the altercation becomes even more heated. Looking at his wrist, which Franklin continues to hold tightly, Jurgen asserts: ‘I got a special interest in everything you do’. Franklin is thus not only a representative of the United States Army on the battlefield in Korea: he is also a representative of his race. If African Americans were to move forward at home, they had to ensure their conduct on the battlefield provided no excuses for denying them their rights.

The most pivotal event relating to Franklin’s characterization occurs late in the film. By this point there are few surviving members of King Company: of the initial complement of 135 men, only 25 remain. Lacking food, water, and ammunition, and being overrun by the enemy, the men have all but lost hope. Nevertheless, they are ordered to hold their position. As the exhausted soldiers leave the bunker that had afforded them some measure of protection, Lieutenant Clemons makes a final sweep to check nobody has been left behind. He encounters Franklin hiding in a dark corner of the bunker. As Clemons enters the bunker, Franklin’s figure takes shape from the shadows. The gun he is holding is pointed directly at Clemons. Franklin says he could kill Clemons, and no one would suspect murder. ‘Nobody but you’, replies Clemons.

In a particularly revealing exchange, Franklin justifies his refusal to fight, balking at Clemons’ threat to send him to Leavenworth for ten years for desertion:

10 years for what? Cause I don’t want to die for Korea. What [do] I care about this stinkin’ hill? You ought to see where I live back home. I sure ain’t sure I’d die for that… I ain’t going to die for Korea, serve 10 years for it neither.

Clemons responds:
Chances are you’re going to die like it or not, so am I, whether you shoot me or not. Least we’ve got a chance to do it in pretty good company, a lot of men came up here last night. They don’t care anymore about Korea than you do. A lot of them had it just as rough at home as you did. They came up and fought. About 25 of them left. That’s a pretty exclusive club. You can still join up, if you want to. I’m going to move, Franklin. Make up your mind.

In one fell swoop, Clemons simultaneously negates the significance of Franklin’s individual, race-based struggles on the home front and gives him a choice as to whether he will man up and fight or cowardly succumb to the communist foe. In a key moment, Franklin chooses to join the fight.

From this point on, Franklin is not only an integral part of his unit: he becomes the ideal American soldier. He engages in conversations with his comrades and fits in seamlessly. Despite being seriously wounded in a subsequent firefight, he rescues another American from the battlefield and valiantly carries him on his back to the safety of the bunker. He then vigorously reinforces the walls of the bunker to keep the Chinese soldiers out. Finally, reinforcements arrive, and the exhausted Americans are saved.

By the end of the film, Franklin has transformed from a coward to a hero. He has finally been integrated into the American fighting force, and all it took was a stern word from his commanding officer, reminding him of his commitment to Uncle Sam. By providing Franklin with an opportunity to realize his masculine self-esteem, the Korean War had enabled him to play his part as a citizen soldier in his nation’s racially integrated crusade against communism. Notably, too, the three African American soldiers represented in *Pork Chop Hill* are among the few survivors remaining at its conclusion.

Milestone was ‘not proud’ of *Pork Chop Hill*, believing that final edits by Peck, co-producer Sy Bartlett and screenwriter James Webb diminished the film to little more than ‘Gregory Peck and a gun’. Nevertheless, *Pork Chop Hill* was one of the few Korean War films to achieve popular success. According to *Time* magazine, it was one of the top five films of 1959. Attracting the attention of several African American reviewers, *Pork Chop Hill* was deemed ‘one of the better war films’ in the *Chicago Defender*. Interestingly, it was the character of Franklin, rather than Jurgen, who had the greatest impact on audiences and reviewers. Recognizing that the film was raising challenging questions regarding black masculinity and valour, one reviewer in the *Afro American* wrote ‘it’s nice to see a new tan face on the movie screen, cast in a non-stereotypical role, and the actor doing a credible job’. And although the *Pittsburgh Courier’s* review referred to Private Franklin as a ‘soldier-shirker’, it praised the performance of Woody Strode. For Strode, appearing in *Pork Chop Hill* was his ‘best screen opportunity to date’.

White reviewers also commended Strode, including the *New York Times’* Bosley Crowther who highlighted Strode’s ‘moving’ performance ‘as a Negro soldier who goes “chicken” and then recovers’. While these reviews implied an acceptance of the prevailing stereotype that black Americans had indeed started the war in a cowardly fashion, they also highlighted the masculinity Strode brought to the role. Key to these assessments was Strode’s impressive physique and athletic prowess. Standing 6’3”, with a lean, muscular build, Strode’s physicality was an unambiguous marker of his masculinity. Strode laughed about the fact that *Pork*
*Chop Hill* was first film in which he was allowed to wear clothes as opposed to a loin cloth. The combination of his physical appearance, athletic reputation, and talent set him up for success in Hollywood. Following his appearance in *Pork Chop Hill*, *Ebony* magazine compared Strode — ‘the marvelously built, studious and hard-working former football, track and wrestling hero’ — to Harry Belafonte and Sidney Poitier. Strode, the magazine concluded, was ‘the most promising [actor] of them all’. Years later, Strode remarked on his career: ‘I wasn’t the first Black actor to make an impression in Hollywood, but I was one of the first to play dignified roles’.

Interestingly, James Edwards (Corporal Jurgen) was also an off-screen mentor for Strode. As World War II veterans and young African American actors in Hollywood, they shared membership in two exclusive groups. By the time he appeared in *Pork Chop Hill* Edwards had already featured in several war films, including *The Steel Helmet*. Soon after he was cast as Jurgen in *Pork Chop Hill*, Edwards told Strode ‘there’s a part that’s perfect for you. Take this script, learn the lines and we’ll go over it’. Playing the part of Private Franklin was a breakthrough role for Strode. Knowing Strode as an athlete Edwards wanted to help the younger actor succeed in the role. Strode explained that Edwards ‘simplified many of the acting problems in “Pork Chop” … . After work each night, we go to his house and he listens to me and talks to me and puts the whole acting thing in capsule forms’.

As Edwards coached Strode throughout the filming of *Pork Chop Hill*, he cautioned the young actor about getting too comfortable in Hollywood: ‘Woody, you’ll never be white’. ‘Don’t try to be part of their society’, he warned. Perhaps ironically, Strode suggested that Edwards eventually fell victim to Hollywood’s trap ‘because he thought he was an equal’. Edwards was so affected that he became an alcoholic. Strode’s analysis was blunt: Edwards had ‘found out color was the whole thing’. Strode also learned important lessons from fellow actor Paul Robeson whom he knew and admired: ‘I saw what happened to these guys [Edwards and Robeson]’, Strode wrote in his memoir, ‘and I learned from them’.

Most importantly, Strode understood that notwithstanding his own individual success, race remained a barrier for black men. Success would not only mean remaining vigilant but was also contingent on avoiding controversies such as those that had inflicted so much damage on Robeson.

The Korean War was a watershed in American history, not least because it was the first conflict fought by an integrated US military. From 1950, stories of the 24th Infantry’s alleged cowardice in the heat of battle reprised familiar white assertions that black Americans were inferior soldiers, lacking in the physical and psychological capabilities required of the nation’s fighting men. Through its portrayal of Corporal Thompson as a strong, brave, capable, and cool tempered medic who gracefully meets every challenge he faces and is accepted by his fellow soldiers, *The Steel Helmet* challenged prevailing stereotypes of African American cowardice. Yet, the film’s confrontation with the absurdity and hypocrisy of racism on the home front elicited a mixed reception from audiences and prompted condemnation from the Pentagon.
In different ways, *Pork Chop Hill* also challenged contemporary attitudes regarding black soldiers in Korea. Whereas Private Franklin represents common misperceptions that African Americans cowered on the battlefield, fled from danger, and challenged direct orders, Corporal Jurgen highlights the potential of African Americans in an integrated United States military. It is not until Lieutenant Clemens challenges Franklin’s perceptions of injustice at home that Franklin can release the anger that has served as a barrier to his loyalty and morale, and fight. When his rage is redirected toward the communist enemy rather than his countrymen, Franklin proves himself a worthy and effective soldier. The message is clear: under the guiding hand of strong (white) military leadership, African Americans can overcome their natural inclinations and contribute meaningfully to the US military in its crusade to protect the nation and the free world from the tyrannies of monolithic communism.

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**Notes**


2. John M. Broder, ‘War and Black GIs’ Memories: Veterans of the Action in Korea Set Out on a Painful Journey to Erase Record of Shame: The Quest Proves Elusive’, *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles), 15 November 1989. ‘Bugged out’ was a phrase used commonly during the Korean War to describe units or men that fled from the enemy, or otherwise acted in a cowardly fashion during battle.


8. Gordon, *Film is Like a Battleground*, 71.


10. Ibid., 256.

11. Gordon, *Film is Like a Battlefield*, 66.


15. Fuller, Lang-Fuller and Rudes, *A Third Face*, 256.

16. Gordon, *Film is Like a Battleground*, 66.


18. Fuller, ‘The Steel Helmet’.

19. Lisa Dombrowski cited in Gordon, *Film is Like a Battleground*, 75.


21. Ibid., 262.

22. Ibid., 263.

23. Gordon, *Film is Like a Battlefield*, 73.


29. ‘The Steel Helmet’ to Play in Harlem’, *New York Amsterdam News*, 14 April 1951.
35. Pork Chop Hill. Directed by Lewis Milestone. 1959; Los Angeles, CA: United Artists, MGM.
37. College-educated Strode was one of the first African Americans to play in the National Football League. He also played alongside Jackie Robinson at UCLA. See Woody Strode and Sam Young, Gold Dust: The Warm and Candid Memoirs of a Pioneer Black Athlete and Actor (New York: Madison Books, 1990), 93.
42. ‘Woody Strode Clicks in “Porkchop Hill”’, Pittsburgh Courier, 23 May 1959.
44. ‘Woody Strode Clicks in “Porkchop Hill”’. 
45. Strode and Young, Gold Dust, 191.
47. Strode and Young, Gold Dust, 192.
48. ‘Woody Strode Clicks in “Porkchop Hill”’. 
49. Strode and Young, Gold Dust, 192.

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