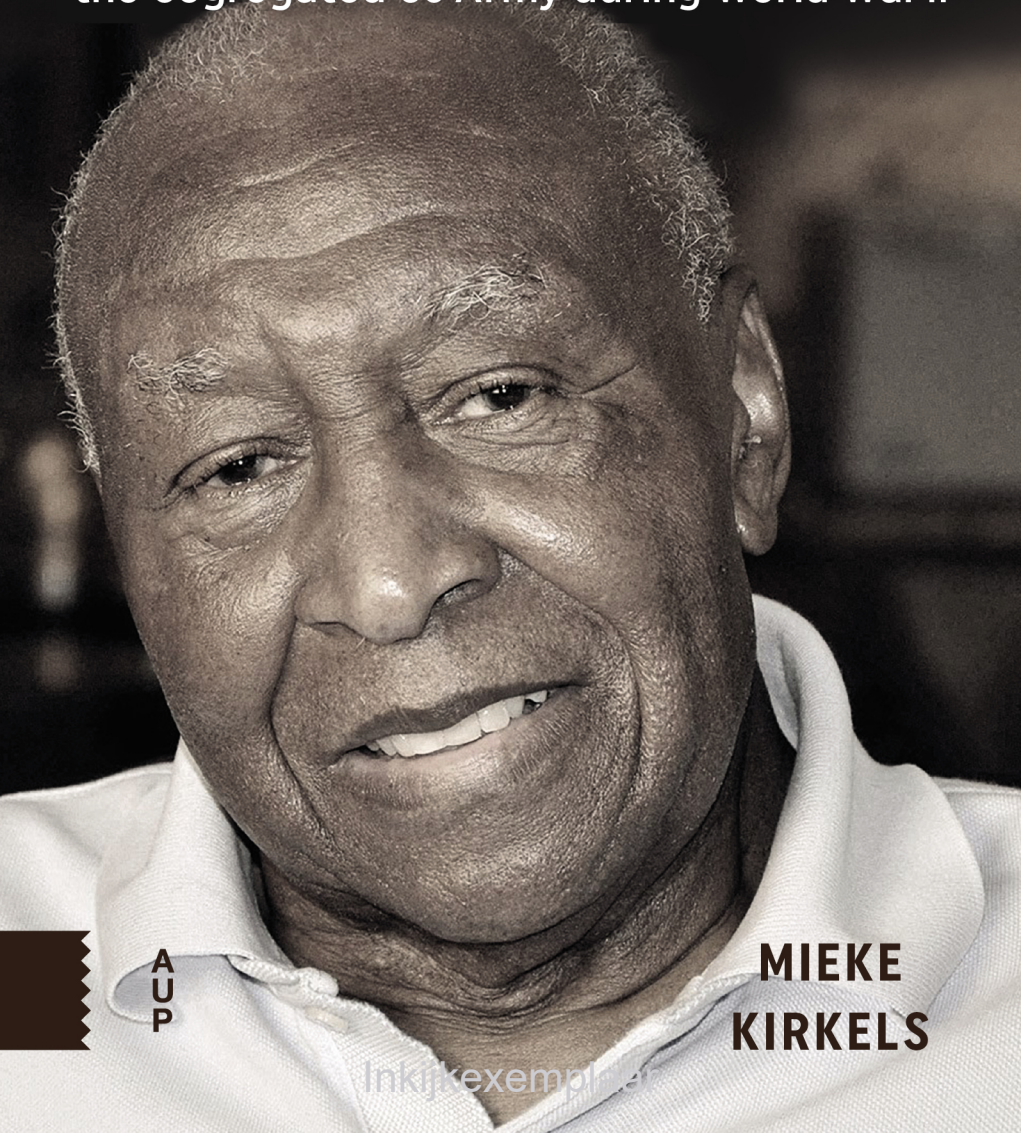


From Alabama to Margraten

The Story of War Veteran Jefferson Wiggins in
the Segregated US Army during World War II



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MIEKE
KIRKELS

Inkijkevoorbeeld

When he returned to the Netherlands in 2009, decades after World War II, Jefferson Wiggins realized that no one he met knew about the segregated US Army during the war, nor did they know about the contribution of Black American soldiers to the liberation of the Netherlands. They were not mentioned anywhere in Dutch history books or in archives. Together with oral historian Mieke Kirkels, Wiggins sat down to record his memories. Wiggins passed away in 2013, and his widow, Janice Wiggins-Paterson, continued the project in his memory. With newly discovered archival material, and richly illustrated, this book gives a lively account of an undocumented story of WWII, Black American, and Dutch military history.



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MIEKE KIRKELS is an oral historian and the author of several acclaimed books on oral history and Dutch war history. She is also an Officer in the Order of Orange Nassau.

"While history is often a clash of great powers that spreads worldwide, it is equally a struggle of individuals caught in the maelstrom of time. The life story of Jefferson Wiggins, captured here in an engaging and insightful manner, clearly portrays how an African American soldier faces the completely unanticipated consequences of his military recruitment, resulting in hardship at a military cemetery on the other side of the Atlantic."

– prof. dr. Kees Ribbens, Erasmus University Rotterdam

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Inkijkexemplaar

From Alabama to Margraten

MIEKE KIRKELS

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**THE STORY OF WAR VETERAN
JEFFERSON WIGGINS
IN THE SEGREGATED US ARMY
DURING WORLD WAR II**

Amsterdam University Press

Inkijkexemplaar

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“I’ve learned that people will forget what you said,
people will forget what you did, but people will
never forget how you made them feel.”

– Maya Angelou

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Jefferson Wiggins in September 2009 in Margraten, the Netherlands, after the presentation of *From Farmfield to Soldiers Cemetery* (Photo: J.P. Geussens)

Words by Jefferson Wiggins

This story is substantially based on facts. I say “substantially” because it was not written from notes or records but rather from memories. At the time of the most compelling and formative experiences of this story, I was young, uneducated and unsophisticated. I had little vision of a future for myself, much less a vision that more than fifty years into the future I would have any reason to write these words or that others would have any reason to read them. So this work is built from memories. Over the years, some memories have faded, others have crystallized, and still others have been shaped by the perspective of time, experience and emotion.

The story is as I remember it, as I remember experiencing it. Some may remember it differently. Others may choose to forget altogether because of the pain and humiliation that is involved.

This story is written in the third person, yet it is about me. I have used the real names of characters. In writing this story, I found myself alternating between the first and third persons. Some memories were too painful to commit to paper in the first person. Yet the experiences upon which this work is based were far too personal to ascribe to characters with fictitious names. So the work stands as it is. This struggle for perspective, in itself, speaks volumes to the impact of these events and memories on my life.

Jefferson Wiggins, *Another Generation Almost Forgotten*
(pag 13: Xlibris, 2003)

Foreword

Jefferson Wiggins' memories are both powerful and essential to understanding the complexities of war and the sacrifices made by so many. His story not only highlights the hardships he and his fellow African American soldiers endured, but also serves as a stark reminder of the inequalities that persisted even during a time of global conflict.

Jefferson Wiggins served as a first sergeant in the segregated 960th Quartermaster Service Company of the US Army. His unit's mission was to dig the graves and bury the soldiers who were killed in the war in the Netherlands American Cemetery in Margraten.

When Wiggins returned to Margraten, he discovered how little the Dutch knew about the racial segregation in the US Army during World War II. It was thanks to his determination that this forgotten chapter of history came to light.

Mieke Kirkels, who worked with Jefferson Wiggins to

document his memories, has made an invaluable contribution to our understanding of our shared history in the Netherlands and the United States with “From Alabama to Margraten.” This book brings new insights and details to the story of the African American troops in the Netherlands, deepening our awareness of their experiences.

As the Dutch Ambassador to the United States, I am especially grateful for the efforts of Mieke Kirkels. This book is not just a tribute to Jefferson Wiggins and his fellow soldiers, but also a call to all of us to keep exploring and understanding history in all its aspects. It reminds us that the fight for freedom and equality, both then and now, often left many in the shadows. We must continue to share their stories so that their sacrifices are never forgotten.

I am also glad that this important book is now available in English, making it accessible to a worldwide audience. The story of Jefferson Wiggins and the African American troops in Margraten deserves to be told far and wide because it is a testament to the strength and heroism of those valiant men.

I hope it resonates deeply with readers everywhere.

Birgitta Tazelaar

Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to the United States

Preface

More than one million African American men and women served in the US armed forces in World War II. Sixteen thousand of them were stationed in the Netherlands.

Their stories, presented here in Mieke Kirkels' book, *From Alabama to Margraten*, are vitally important for understanding the contributions that Black troops made to the war effort. African American soldiers were assigned to racially segregated units, largely toiling in service and supply roles.

In her earlier work, Kirkels recorded and shared the memories of Jefferson Wiggins, who arrived in the Netherlands as a nineteen-year-old first sergeant in the 960th Quartermaster Service Company of the US Army. Wiggins and his unit dug burial plots at the Netherlands American Cemetery, in the village of Margraten. The work was back-breaking and emotionally devastating.

Part of the power of these stories is that Wiggins and

other Black soldiers served proudly during the war at a time when America treated them as second-class citizens. The rallying cry for Black Americans during World War II was “Double Victory”, as they fought to achieve victory both over fascism abroad and over racism at home. They understood it was not enough to defeat the Nazis and the Axis powers in Europe, only to come home to racial discrimination in the United States.

When Black veterans returned to America after the war ended, they kept fighting, with many becoming leaders in the civil rights movement. For too long the story of the vast contributions that African American troops made to the war effort have been erased from our history books. Mieke Kirkels has done pioneering work to make visible the stories of Black Liberators in the Netherlands. I hope readers learn as much from this book as I did.

Matthew F. Delmont

Sherman Fairchild Distinguished Professor of History at
Dartmouth College

Author of *Half American: The Epic Story of African Americans Fighting World War II at Home and Abroad* (New York: Viking, 2022)

Preface to this Edition

The first edition of this book was published in November 2014. Jefferson Wiggins had passed away the year before, on January 9, 2013. The book led to many reactions in the Netherlands. Until then, few people in the Netherlands knew anything about the involvement of Black American soldiers in the liberation from Nazi Germany. Some years earlier, in 2009, Jefferson Wiggins already spoke of that involvement in the book *Van boerenakker tot soldatenkerkhof* (published in English as *From Farmland to Soldiers Cemetery*) and in the documentary *Akkers van Margraten* (*Fields of Margraten*).*

Jeff was invited to join the presentation of that book and the documentary in Margraten in September 2009.

* Mieke Kirkels, Jo Purnot, and Frans Roebroeks, *From Farmland to Soldiers Cemetery: Eye Witness Accounts of the Construction of the American Cemetery in Margraten* (Margraten: Stichting Akkers van Margraten, 2009); *Akkers van Margraten* (Ruim Kader Films, 2010).

That was sixty-five years after he had worked there as a gravedigger. He shook hands with many people while there and was astonished to learn that no one he met knew about the segregation of the US Army during World War II. That is why he asked me to help him write his recollections of that awful time. I did so in March 2010, at his home in Connecticut. His neighbor, Sherryl Hauck, a camerawoman, filmed the whole conversation we had – day by day. The transcription of her film in English was translated into Dutch and edited with the help of Janice Wiggins, Jeff’s wife, after Jeff had passed away. The book was presented in November 2014.

This second English edition, expanded with information based on research conducted since then – with additions to Jeff’s own words – was translated into English by Frans Kooymans. As to historical dates and facts, the book is based on Jeff’s recollections. Facts presented in historical archives and other books do not necessarily have a greater impact than what Jeff remembered.

The original edition led to a follow-up oral history project entitled *Kinderen van zwarte bevrijders (Children of Black Liberators)* and to a book with the same title.* Owing in my opinion to the impact of the Black Lives Matter movement, this has since resulted in several new productions in the Netherlands about the role of Black American liberators during World War II.

While working on this second edition, I often watched

* Mieke Kirkels, *Kinderen van zwarte bevrijders. Een verzwegen geschiedenis* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2017).

the news on television about the war in Ukraine. Especially when mass graves and the transport and burial of slain soldiers were mentioned, I could only think of what Jeff Wiggins told me: History keeps repeating itself!

Mieke Kirkels, September 2024