

A Study Guide for.....

**Inman's War: A Soldier's
Story of Life in a Colored
Battalion in WW II**

By

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INTRODUCTION

In the late 1930's, the clouds of war gathered all across Europe. As the German war machine advanced, countries started falling like dominoes. On March 12, 1938, Germany invaded Austria. On October 15, 1938, the Germans entered Czechoslovakia. On September 1, 1939, Poland was crushed. Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands soon followed. Even the French army was no match for the German might; France surrendered to Germany in June of 1940. Also in early 1940, England, and especially the city of London, found itself under almost nightly attacks from German bombs and rockets. During the German advances and conquests, the United States remained officially neutral. That is, it remained neutral until December 7, 1941, when the Japanese launched a surprise attack on the American naval base at Pearl Harbor in the Hawaiian Islands. The next day, the United States declared war on the empire of Japan, marking the U.S.'s official entrance into the great conflict of World War II. Shortly thereafter, on December 11, 1941, Germany and Italy declared war on the United States.

To help build its military forces, The United States called many Americans to service through what was called the military draft. The draft was a process whereby most of the eligible young men between the ages of 18-45 were called for military service. The main character of this story, Inman Perkins, was one of those drafted and asked to help protect the freedoms of American life. This is his story and a story of the 449th Signal Construction Battalion of the Army Air Corps. It is also a story of America during one of the darkest periods in its history.



Study Questions

Pages 1-33

Chapter 1 “Destinations,” Chapter 2 “Arrivals,” Chapter 3 “Ghosts”:

1). In Chapter 1, we are introduced to four characters: Inman, Olivia, Doc, and Williams. What do you learn about each character, and what are your first impressions of each character?

Inman:

Olivia:

Doc:

Williams:

2). The *setting* of a story is often very important. The setting is where and when the story begins. However, it is also much more than that. The setting also influences the overall atmosphere of a story and sets the stage for the events that follow. As this story begins, the author combines two specific locations to build the setting: the caboose on the troop train and the base at Davis-Monthan Field. Briefly describe each of these locations. Then, describe how you think Inman, Doc, and Williams feel about being in both of those places.

3). One night, while eating supper at Davis-Monthan Field, Inman, Doc, and Williams notice a sign on the wall that says, “Loose Lips Sink Ships.” What exactly does that mean? Why was it important to take that advice seriously?



4). Why do the men hate getting their physical examinations? Why do you think these examinations were so important during that time period?

5). In Chapter 3, we are introduced to Sergeant Ingram. How is he described? What are your first impressions of him?

6). The men are asked to clean up the barracks and make it ready for the next group of men who will be moving in. When they finish, Sergeant Ingram tells them he is very proud of them. Why is he so proud of them?

7). On page 32, Doc says, “Call me stupid, but I didn’t think it would be like this.” What does he mean by that statement?

8). Chapter 3 is titled “Ghosts.” Why do you think the author decided to use this title for the chapter?

Pages 34-55

Chapter 4 “Transitions,” Chapter 5 “Departures”:

- 1). In Chapter 4, Inman explains how he learned to drive a car. Briefly describe that experience and what this section tells you about the character of Inman.
- 2). At the end of Chapter 4, Inman says,
“In the short time I had known them we had been traveling companions, baseball players, barracks cleaners – and even ghosts together. My father used to tell me it was friendship, not money, that made one rich. In that case, I was feeling wealthy. Very wealthy.” (p.42)

How do you think most people would respond to what Inman says here? How do *you* feel about what he says?

- 3). As they were leaving Davis-Monthan Field, Inman says, “I wasn’t going to miss that place.” (p.44). What, in particular, do you think he wasn’t going to miss?



- 4). After the train leaves the station in Tucson, Sergeant Ingram tells the men where they are headed. They are being “...assigned to a brand-new outfit, the 449th Signal Construction Battalion of the Army Air Corps.” (p.49). How do they react to this news?

- 5). “Scuttlebutt” had many versions of what their new duties would be with the 449th. First, what is “scuttlebutt”? Second, why are the men so interested in what “scuttlebutt” had to say?

Pages 56-88

Chapter 6 “Basics,” Chapter 7 “Wonders”:

- 1). Chapter 6 provides a description of basic training, everything from classes to life in an army barracks. For most of the men, this is their first time away from home. How do they respond to their new surroundings and responsibilities?
- 2). The game “Simon Says” (p.64) was used to help the soldiers learn to follow orders correctly. Using the description provided, play this game with someone else and see how easy or difficult you find it to be.
- 3). In one of their classes in basic training, an instructor tells the men that those in the Army Air Corps hold the fate of the war in their hands (p.69). What exactly does the instructor mean by that statement?
- 4). In Chapter 7 we are introduced to Colonel Ellis. How is he described? What are your first impressions of him?

5). About two weeks after arriving at Fort Bliss, Inman is called into his battalion headquarters and is told he is being promoted to the rank of Master Sergeant. How does he respond to the news? How do Doc and Williams respond when they find out about this?

6). Inman is also told to begin training drivers for a wide variety of duties both on and off the base. Why does Colonel Ellis feel that Inman is the right person to take charge of this important responsibility?

7). When Inman, Doc, and Williams bring the other men together to choose those who would become military drivers, they discover quickly this is not going to be an easy task. How does Inman eventually choose those who will become the drivers?



Pages 89-105

Chapter 8 “Preparations,” Chapter 9 “Surprises”:

1). Those chosen to become drivers have very little, if any, actual driving experience. Therefore, Inman decides to create a classroom where they will be taught to drive the same way his students were taught back at Sumner High School. How do his new *pupils* respond to their classroom work? Do you think Inman would be a fun teacher to have? Why or why not?

2). We learn much about Williams at this point in the story. He becomes a very valuable member of the battalion. What is it about him that makes him so valuable?

3). Chapter 9 begins,

“President Roosevelt, in describing the morning of the sudden and shocking attack on Pearl Harbor, had called it ‘a date which will live in infamy.’

Well, now I had one of those of my own.” (p.95)

What does Inman mean by that? What happens in this chapter that makes Inman feel this way?

4). Johnny Tyler, one of the drivers, makes quite a few mistakes while learning to drive. How does Inman handle this situation? If you had been the teacher, would you have handled it the same way –or differently?

Pages 106-135

Chapter 10 “Fences,” Chapter 11 “Messages”:

1). At the beginning of Chapter 10, Williams describes going over to the other side of the base to look for parts for their trucks. What trouble does he run into there? When he later tells Inman and Doc what happened, why do they find his story so funny?

2). In Chapter 10 we are also introduced to Colonel Rogers. Colonel Rogers has very specific feelings about the men of the 449th. What are those feelings? How would you describe Colonel Rogers?

3). On pages 112-115 we learn a great deal more about how Inman views the world. In describing what his parents taught him as a young boy, he says,

“I was taught by both that, generally, we were all more alike than different. And this, according to my parents, was especially true in the area of race. I was also taught that both beauty and deed were not just skin-deep; rather, both had roots that ran all the way to the core of our souls. Differences, my parents said, were *created* by men, not inherently *in* men.” (p. 113)

Compare Inman’s views in this area with the following individuals:

Colonel Ellis

Colonel Rogers

A member of the 449th (your choice)

4). When Inman finally talks to the men about his conversation with Colonel Ellis about where they were, and were not, welcome on the base, what does he say to them? How do the men react to his words?

5). Chapter 10 ends with these lines:

“For now there were fences.

Lots of fences.

Of all types.” (p.118)



What types of *fences* are being described here?

6). Why is mail call so important for the men? What types of news do they receive from back home?

7). Johnny Tyler gets a letter from his girlfriend back home. Why do the others tease him so badly about the contents of that letter? How does Johnny react to their teasing?

8). At the end of Chapter 11 (pp. 133-134), Williams tells a story about Doc. What do we then learn about Doc? What does this story also tell about Williams?

Pages 136-178

Chapter 12 “Challenges,” Chapter 13 “Passes”:

1). When the men from the other side of the base show up and want to play baseball, most, on *both* sides, don't think it is a good idea. Why? Why do you think Inman eventually invites them to play a game?

2). When Inman's team starts winning the game, he becomes very worried. What is he worried would happen if his team wins?



3). Toward the end of the baseball game, Inman makes a decision that leads to his team's losing the game. Why does he make this decision? If you were in his place, would you have made the same decision under the same circumstances?

4). When Inman and Doc talk after the game, Doc says,
“You are the one who lost today. You lost part of your soul, and you should be ashamed of yourself. You're the one I feel sorry for – not them.” (p. 158)

What does Doc mean by this?

5). When the men are finally given passes and permission to leave the base, Colonel Ellis and Inman decide it would be wise to have many of the men go across the border to the town of Juarez in Mexico. Why do they decide to send them there instead of into El Paso?

6). What do you think the men of the 449th enjoy the most about their trip to Mexico? The least? Why do you think they are so quiet on the ride back to Fort Bliss?

Pages 179-228

Chapter 14 “Homecomings,” Chapter 15 “Marriages,” Chapter 16 “Promises”:

1). When Inman arrives back in St. Louis during his leave period, he goes first to look at Sumner High School. Why do you think he stops there first?

2). Olivia is in charge of the scrap drive sponsored by Sumner High School. What kinds of items are donated to the scrap drive? Why were scrap drives so important to the war effort?

3). Why did Inman and Olivia have to keep their marriage a secret? How do they feel about this?

4). On the day of the wedding, Doc and Judy drive over to pick up Inman and Olivia in what type of vehicle? What problems does this cause?

5). After the wedding, they all drive to Forest Park, one of Inman's favorite places in St. Louis. What happens while they were there? Why is Doc so worried about their being in Forest Park?



Pages 229-255

Chapter 17 "Games," Chapter 18 "Retributions":

1). There are many reasons why the men are upset when they hear they will be losing the right to use the Service Club the night they had scheduled it for a party. What are those reasons?

2). When it is discovered that Williams and Tyler had been beaten, many in the battalion want to find those responsible and retaliate immediately. However, Inman orders them not to. Why do you think he gives that order?

3). How does Colonel Ellis respond when he found out about Williams and Tyler? What actions does he then take?

4). Later that evening, Colonel Ellis comes to the barracks to let the men know what is being done to find out exactly what happened earlier that day. How do the men respond to his words? How would you have felt that night after hearing Colonel Ellis's speech?

5). Albertson is the first one of the men to take matters into his own hands. What does he do, and why do you think he does it?

6). How does Colonel Rogers respond when he sees Albertson and the other men standing at attention outside the service club?



7). How does Colonel Ellis's quick thinking keep the men from getting into serious trouble that evening?

Pages 256-296.

Chapter 19 "Bombers," Chapter 20 "Crossings":

1). Joe Louis is described as a symbol of many types to the men of the 449th. What does he stand for most to them?

2). Why does Inman choose Tyler to be one of the men to get in the ring and box with Joe Louis? Why does he also choose Doc to be one of the sparring partners? At this point in the story, what do both of these men represent to the battalion?

3). In many ways, the visit by Joe Louis helps unify the men all across the base. Why is unity so badly needed at this point?



4). How does the atmosphere in the barracks change after Mr. Louis's visit?

5). After traveling by train to Hampton Roads, Virginia, the 449th board the *S. S. Livermore* to continue the next part of their journey to Europe. Just before leaving, they say goodbye to Colonel Ellis, who had been assigned to other duties. How does Inman feel about saying goodbye to him?

6). Most of the men had never been on a ship before. How do they respond to ocean travel and life aboard the ship? How do they act the night of the submarine warning?

7). Toward the end of the ocean crossing, Inman finds out the battalion is not going to be kept together once they arrive in Italy. How does he react to the news?

Pages 297-328.

Chapter 21 "Responsibilities," Chapter 22 "Heroes":

1). When the 449th arrive in Italy, the battalion is split into two groups: Group Able and Group Baker. What responsibilities are assigned to each group? Explain the importance of the work they are given.



2). Albertson makes his "Melito di Apple stew" for everyone to eat once Inman's group settles into the old schoolhouse in Melito di Napoli. Albertson shows a good amount of creativity in making that stew. What are some of the other creative activities the men do to improve their surroundings and gain supplies while there?

3). After the German attacks, Inman describes the battalion's work as "Ants rebuilding their mounds." (p.310) What exactly does he mean by that?

4). How does the battalion end up with its own fleet of trucks? Who is responsible for that?

5). At the village of Capodichino, the men help rescue members of a family who are trapped in a building that has been bombed. They put aside their own personal safety while providing this help. Why is this such a dangerous rescue attempt? How do the villagers show their gratitude?

6). Chapter 22 ends with these lines:

"The sun was rising slowly over the mountain range to our east. A day of new beginnings and a day of new hope was being born.

The men of the 449th were ready for anything." (p.328)

At this point in the story, what are your feelings and thoughts about the men of the 449th? Do you feel they are ready for *anything*?

Pages 329-345

Chapter 23 “Passages”:

1). You may have noticed immediately that Chapter 23 is written differently than the other chapters. That is because Chapter 23 is written in a different *point of view*. This means that the story is no longer told through Inman’s eyes. Instead, the story is now told through what is called the *omniscient* point of view. Omniscient means, traditionally, an “all knowing” point of view. When a story is told from this point of view, the reader knows exactly what is going on at all times and what is going on in the minds of all characters. What are the main differences you noticed in how the story is being told in this chapter?

2). The battle of Anzio is described on pages 335 and 336. Why is the battle of Anzio so important at this point in the war? Also, why are the men of the 449th so important to this particular battle?

3). Inman chooses Doc, Albertson, and Tyler to go with him to repair the communication lines that the enemy had knocked down in their raids. Why is it important to repair those lines so quickly?

4). In your own words, describe what happens after the lightning strikes the fuel depot.

5). Near the end of the story, Williams says, “He always said we don’t salute sergeants.” (p.345) This is followed by, “This one we do,” Doc said softly. “This one we do.” (p.345)

What does Doc mean by that? Why do all the men salute in this scene?

6). As you finish reading the story, what are your thoughts about the men of the 449th Signal Construction Battalion and what they went through?

7). Which event in the story was most memorable to you – and why?



PROJECTS AND ACTIVITIES TO BE COMPLETED DURING AND AFTER READING THE STORY:

A). **Characterization:**

An author has many ways of introducing characters in a story to the reader. The more common methods of introducing characters are through the following:

- *What the characters say.
- *What the characters do (their own actions).
- *What others say about them.
- *Their physical characteristics/features.
- *Their own personal beliefs and attitudes.

Choose a character from the following list. Then, tell how the author used the areas listed above to introduce that character to us.

- *Inman
- *Olivia
- *Doc
- *Williams
- *Tyler
- *Colonel Ellis



B). **Lost Letters:**

The story in *Inman's War* is based partly on material found in a large group of letters Inman wrote to Olivia while he was in the Army Air Corps. It is also known that at least a dozen letters he wrote to Olivia were later lost when Olivia moved from place to place in the years after the war. Choose any section of the story you wish, and then write a letter from Inman to Olivia during that particular time period. Pretend that it is one of the "lost letters."

If you wish to try something different, try writing a letter from Olivia to Inman.

C). **Geography:**

On a map, chart the locations of the events of the story. In particular, chart the journey through these locations:

- *St. Louis, Missouri
- *Tucson, Arizona (Davis-Monthan Field)

- *El Paso, Texas (Fort Bliss)
- *Dyersburg, Tennessee
- *Hampton Roads, Virginia
- *Naples, Italy

Briefly list a summary of the major events that took place at each location.

D). **1943 – The Year in Review:**

The story in *Inman's War* begins in the year 1943. Below you will find some information about what life was like in the United States at that time. After reading through this information, compare it to your life today. If you made a similar list for your life in the present, what would be on your list?

In 1943:

Prices in 1943:

- **Bread was nine cents a loaf.
- **Milk was sixty-two cents a gallon.
- **Eggs were sixty-two cents a dozen.
- **The average car cost \$1,100.
- **Gasoline was twenty-one cents a gallon.
- **The average house cost \$8,011.
- **A first-class stamp cost three cents.
- **The average income was \$2,561 per year.
- **Minimum wage was thirty cents an hour.



The President of the United States was Franklin D. Roosevelt.

The Vice-President of the United States was Henry A. Wallace.

The “Best Picture” of the year was *Casablanca*.

The top songs of 1943 were *As Time Goes By*, by Rudy Vallee; *Sunday, Monday, or Always*, by Bing Crosby; *Paper Doll*, by the Mills Brothers; *Taking a Chance on Love*, by Benny Goodman.

Popular new toy in 1943: The board game *Chutes and Ladders*.

Now, compare the list above with similar areas in your life today. How would your list be different?

(Note: 1943 information compiled from <http://www.dmarie.com/timecap>)

E). **Cast of Characters:**

From the list of characters provided below, choose one character and explain his or her significance to the story. Then, choose a character not on this list and explain that character’s significance to the story. If the two characters you choose interact in the story, also explain how that interaction was important.

Tyler, Colonel Ellis, Sergeant Ingram, Albertson, Colonel Rogers, Sanders, Davis, Bud, Colonel Phillips, Judy Robinson, Joe Louis, Reverend Danielson, Principal Brantley.

F). Vocabulary Building:

Please provide definitions for each of the words listed below. Then, tell the significance of the word to the events in the story.

- *Scuttlebutt
- *scrap drive
- *Censors
- *segregated
- *mess hall
- *Service Club
- *Motor Pool
- *six-by-sixes
- *Uncle Sam
- *The Ville
- *swab detail



G). Symbolism:

Symbolism is when authors use people, places, and a wide variety of objects and events to represent or stand for larger ideas and/or concepts. There are many symbols in *Inman's War*. Choose one of the following and explain what it represented in the story? Then, describe the importance of another symbol, one not on this list.

- The caboose
- Joe Louis
- The Service Club
- Albertson's Last Stand
- The convoy of trucks
- Juarez, Mexico
- The Bird Cage at the St. Louis Zoo
- Johnny Tyler

H). Point of View:

Choose a short scene in the story and rewrite it as if it were being told through the eyes of another character in the story. Then, tell how this new point of view makes that scene similar to and/or different from the original version.

D). Military History:

There were other segregated military units during World War II. Some of those, which are better known than others, include the Tuskegee Airmen, the Red Ball Express, and the 761st Tank Battalion. Read about one of these groups and report what you discover. How were their experiences similar to and/or different from what the 449th went through?

J). Chapter Titles:

Look again at the titles for each of the chapters in the book. Choose one of the titles and explain why you think the author used that particular title to represent the events within that chapter.

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