

“MANY OF THEM ARE AMONG MY BEST MEN”: THE UNITED STATES NAVY LOOKS
AT ITS AFRICAN AMERICAN CREWMEN, 1755-1955

by

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B.A., Brooklyn College, *City University of New York*, 1991

M.A., Kansas State University, 1995

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

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Abstract

Historians of the integration of the American military and African American military participation have argued that the post-World War II period was the critical period for the integration of the U.S. Navy. This dissertation argues that World War II was “the” critical period for the integration of the Navy because, in addition to forcing the Navy to change its racial policy, the war altered the Navy’s attitudes towards its African American personnel.

African Americans have a long history in the U.S. Navy. In the period between the French and Indian War and the Civil War, African Americans served in the Navy because whites would not. This is especially true of the peacetime service, where conditions, pay, and discipline dissuaded most whites from enlisting.

During the Civil War, a substantial number of escaped slaves and other African Americans served. Reliance on racially integrated crews survived beyond the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, only to succumb to the principle of “separate but equal,” validated by the Supreme Court in the *Plessy* case (1896). As racial segregation took hold and the era of “Jim Crow” began, the Navy separated the races, a task completed by the time America entered World War I. The Navy paid the price in lost efficiency to maintain the policy. After the war, the Navy chose to accept African Americans solely for duty as messmen and stewards.

Matters changed in World War II. The Navy eventually lifted its restrictions on African American enlistment and promotions, commissioned its first African American officers, and finally committed itself to a program of integration. The increased interaction between whites and African Americans had also led white officers and policymakers to re-assess the value of African American sailors, a crucial sine qua non for the actualization of integration in the postwar years.

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Ironically, this project grew out of the oral portion of my preliminary exams. Originally, I hoped to write a top-notch dissertation on industrial mobilization in the Union Navy during the American Civil War. During my orals, it became very clear that I was not “excited” about this project. Drs. Louise Breen and Lou Falkner Williams, prominent members of my supervisory committee, pointed out the obvious. I teach African American history, why not write about it too? Why not combine my interests in American military history and race? Huh, what a novel idea! I then had a conversation with my advisor, Dr. Mark Parillo, about the racist attitudes expressed by Admiral David Dixon Porter during the American Civil War. I was hooked. We then “raised anchor” and we were under way.

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This may sound strange but I must offer special thanks to the 1989 feature film *Glory*. This landmark film is a celebration of a little-known act of mass courage during the American Civil War and it introduced me to the subject of African American military history.

Lastly, this dissertation would never have been finished if not for my father, Allan Davis, and my late mother, Donna Davis, both of Brooklyn, New York. How can a son thank his parents for all they have done for him, and continue to do for him, throughout his life? Besides giving me life, they have supported me, as always, emotionally and financially throughout my

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Michael Shawn Davis

Chapter 1 - Introduction

This dissertation explores the experiences of African Americans in the U.S. Navy from the French and Indian War to the Korean War. This study also describes and explains the changes in the racial policies and racial attitudes of the U.S. naval service over that time. It argues that the Second World War was truly “the” critical period for bringing about the racial integration of the U.S. naval service.

In the eighteenth century, the U.S. Navy was essentially an integrated service: African American and white sailors lived together. Many African Americans served as enlisted men because there were no formal quotas or restrictions. During the early years of the republic, when the fledgling U.S. Navy needed seamen of any color to protect the nation, African Americans were part of every warship’s crew. During the War of 1812, the Navy’s enlisted force was between 6% and 10% African American.¹ In the Civil War, 25% of the Navy’s enlisted force was African American, and these men fought with distinction in ironclads on the Mississippi River, in blockading vessels on the East and Gulf coasts, and in warships patrolling the oceans of the world.² In the latter part of the nineteenth century, the U.S. Navy continued to enlist African Americans, and they averaged between 20% and 30% of the enlisted ranks.³ However, the recruitment of African Americans substantially decreased thereafter. The African Americans joining the Navy were limited to the least desirable jobs: service positions, waiting tables, and

¹ Estimates vary. Exact racial statistics concerning the Old Navy are difficult to locate. See Enlistment of Men of Colored Race, January 23, 1942, a note appended to Hearings before the General Board of the Navy, 1942, Operational Archives, Department of the Navy.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

serving white officers. Segregation was prevalent in working, eating, and sleeping arrangements. As the nation moved into World War I, the Navy became increasingly restrictive in its use of African American sailors. Only 6,750 African American sailors, just 1.2% of the Navy's total enlistment, served in World War I.⁴ Their service was limited mainly to mess duty and coal passing.

When postwar enlistments were resumed in 1923, the Navy recruited Filipino stewards instead of African Americans; reducing the number of African Americans in the Navy to 0.55% of the enlisted force.⁵ A decade later the Navy reopened the messman branch to African Americans, this time with the rationale that a war in the Pacific and the scheduled independence of the Philippines in 1936 might eliminate the opportunity to enlist East Asian servants. African Americans quickly took advantage of this limited opportunity. Their numbers rose from 441 in 1932 to 4,007 in June 1940.⁶ War again would prove to be the great catalyst in the struggle of African Americans to win their rights as Americans. As this dissertation will show, the Second World War radically transformed the position of African Americans in the U.S. Navy forever.

As the United States mobilized to meet the growing threat of Nazi Germany, African Americans were well aware that the American military did not want them. The Army detailed them to menial tasks, the Army Air Corps and Marine Corps barred them completely, and the Navy confined them to the mess crew.

⁴ Letter, Rear Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, Acting Chief, Bureau of Navigation, to Representative Hamilton Fish, June 17, 1937, A9-10, General Records of the Department of the Navy.

⁵ Frederick S. Harrod, "Jim Crow in the Navy, (1798-1941)," *Proceedings of the U. S. Naval Institute*, 104, (1979), p. 51.

⁶ Memo, H. A. Badt, Bureau of Navigation, for Officer in Charge, Public Relations, July 24, 1940, subject: Negroes in the U.S. Navy, Nav-641, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel.

Despite the humiliation and discrimination, African Americans offered their services to fight in World War II. White America, once again faced with a struggle for survival, allowed African Americans in the hundreds of thousands to serve and risk their lives in an American military uniform.

Up to now, historians of the participation of African Americans in the American military and the integration of the U.S. armed forces have argued that the racial policies of the U.S. Navy changed most dramatically during the period following the Second World War. For example, Morris J. MacGregor, Jr.'s *Integration of the Armed Forces, 1940-1965* (1989), argues that "the full application of this [the Navy's] new [World War II integration] policy would have to wait [until the post-World War II period] while the Navy's traditional racial attitude warred with its practical desire for efficiency." The U.S. Navy, according to MacGregor, was "the" acknowledged pioneer in integration. The Navy's decision to assign men of both races to certain ships during World War II, MacGregor argues, was not entirely a response to pressure from civil rights organizations, even though Secretary Forrestal relied on friends in the Urban League, particularly Lester Granger, to teach him how to integrate a large organization. Nor was the decision only the work of reformers in the Bureau of Naval Personnel, although this unit was responsible for drafting the regulations that governed the changes in the wartime naval service.

MacGregor believes that the Navy began integrating its general service because segregation proved to be painfully inefficient. This decision was largely the result of the operation of the 1940 draft law. Although imperfectly applied during the Second World War, the anti-discrimination provision of that law produced a massive infusion of African American inductees. The Army, with its larger manpower base and expandable African American units,

could sidestep the implications of a non-discrimination clause, but the presence of large numbers of African Americans in the Navy, “breached the walls of segregation in the Navy.”

Some historians point out that there were individuals and groups who were dissatisfied with the World War II roles of African American naval personnel and that they were determined to make sure that the American military adopted a new racial policy in the post-World War II era. In the foreword to Jack D. Foner’s *Blacks and the Military in American History: A New Perspective* (1974), James B. Shenton argues that the “collapse of empire” after the Second World War caused numbers of African Americans to see parallels between their place in American society and that of other non-whites in the former colonial areas of the world. African Americans would mount their challenge to Jim Crow in the courts, in classrooms, at lunch counters, aboard public transportation, and in the American military establishment. According to Shenton, “the armed forces, which have always been a microcosm of American society, have provided a faithful reflection of the larger society.”

Shenton discusses the recurrent white response to African American participation during wartime. During previous American military conflicts, white Americans at first refused to allow African Americans to join in the country’s war efforts, but as these conflicts deepened, whites were ready to accept African Americans as their allies. And African Americans seeking to prove their worth would enter the American military, only to be thrust aside when peace resumed. Segregation continued to pervade the American military of World War II, and African Americans had to once again serve and possibly die under a military establishment ruled by Jim Crow. But, as Shenton argues, instead of being “thrust aside” when World War II ended, like they were in past military conflicts, African Americans “...insisted that their dues were fully and

finally paid” and that they would either enjoy the full benefits of American citizenship or they would become “domestic dissidents.”

In *Blacks in the Military: Essential Documents* (1981), Bernard C. Nalty and Morris J. MacGregor argue that since nothing meaningful was done to change the racial policy of the American military during the Second World War, both the military and its critics in the African American community were determined to adopt a new racial policy for the American military, including the U.S. Navy, once the war ended. Both historians point out that the American military establishment and civil rights advocates were dissatisfied with the roles played by African American military personnel during the war and the two groups differed on what these new policies should be: military planners were concerned with efficiency and favored some form of racial quota and a limitation on the assignments available to African Americans; civil rights organizations demanded immediate integration and equal opportunity for African Americans in all of the armed services. Whatever the outcome of this debate, one thing was certain: the U.S. military could not return to its prewar practices.

Nalty and MacGregor identify three factors that combined to ensure far-reaching change in the postwar American military. One was the democratic feeling marshaled during the war against the Axis dictatorships, the second was the rising political strength of the African American community, and the third was a growing awareness within the armed services that postwar manpower needs would prove too great, and endure too long, to be supplied by calling upon just part of the American population. A draft would be necessary, and any such system would have to function with a minimum of racial discrimination. According to Nalty and MacGregor, “idealism, political expediency, and military realities thus combined to bring about

change in the [postwar] racial policies of the armed forces,” not during the war itself, as this dissertation contends.

Richard M. Dalfiume observes in his *Desegregation of the U.S. Armed Forces: Fighting on Two Fronts, 1939-1953* (1969) that several forces emerged in the post-World War II period that made it impossible for the federal government and the American people to continue to ignore the issue of race any longer. First, the United States became in the eyes of itself and others the leader of the Free World, and its race problem was a handicap in the Cold War struggle over the destiny of the non-white populations of the world. Second, African Americans came out of World War II with a determination to change their position. Coupled with this new determination was political power derived from the strategic location of African American voting blocks in northern states with a large number of electoral votes. Lastly, numerous white Americans came to the conclusion that the deferred commitment of equal rights must be finally fulfilled. All of these forces, according to Dalfiume, converged during the post-World War II administration of Harry S. Truman.

There are those historians who believe that the American military, including the U.S. Navy, was fully integrated by the Korean War. According to Richard Stillman, II's, *Integration of the Negro in the U.S. Armed Forces* (1968), the “bellwether” for the integration of the U.S. Navy was James V. Forrestal. Pressed by manpower needs and supported by his aide Lester Granger, Forrestal reformed the Navy Department's racial policy. During Forrestal's tenure as secretary of the navy, the Navy abandoned segregated advanced-training facilities for African Americans, integrated basic training, organized auxiliary ships manned by crews that were 10% African American, permitted African American women to serve as officers and enlisted personnel in the WAVES, commissioned its first African American officers, and opened the

ranks of the Marine Corps to African Americans. Despite these reforms, by V-J Day, Stillman argues, the position of the African American in the Navy had not significantly changed. African Americans were still excluded from most jobs, segregated in support roles, and underrepresented in leadership positions. And, by September 1945, more than 85% of African American personnel were still serving in the Steward's Branch. According to Stillman, of all the areas of the United States, the American military establishment has advanced the most rapidly in race relations since World War II. The U.S. armed forces in 1948 were ordered by President Harry S. Truman to provide equal treatment for African Americans. And by the end of the Korean War, Stillman argues, the American armed forces were fully integrated.

According to Gerald Astor's *The Right to Fight: A History of African Americans in the Military* (1998), real change in the mindset of the American military did not occur until the Korean conflict. Beginning with the institutionalized racism prior to World War I, Astor outlines the conflict between a military that regarded African Americans as unfit for effective combat and an African American community insistent on their right to serve as American citizens rather than in segregated regiments. According to Astor, African American combat units had mixed records in both world wars. Usually poorly trained and commanded by African American officers who received little respect and racist white officers, African American units were expected to fail. The legal desegregation of the armed forces after 1948 did little to modify this mind-set. Real change, according to Astor, began in the Korean War. Astor argues that the 24th Infantry Regiment, an all-black unit, was systematically maligned for its wartime performance, but it ironically caused the Army to decide that integration was preferable to maintaining one large, unreliable formation.

Other scholars believe that it was not until after the Korean War that the American military provided fair and equal training for all of its service members. According to Robert W. Mullen's *Blacks in America's Wars: The Shift in Attitudes from the Revolutionary War to Vietnam* (1973), by the time the Korean War broke out in 1950, military integration was "universal in policy although limited in practice." According to Mullen, *de jure* segregation and discrimination were virtually eliminated from the internal structure of the active military forces and, by the end of 1954, equal treatment had become official military policy. In fact, the American military rapidly became the least segregated of the major institutions in American society.

Michael Lee Lanning writes in *The African-American Soldier: From Crispus Attucks to Colin Powell* (1997) that by the end of the Korean War, "the U.S. military was the most integrated institution in the United States." During the Second World War, African Americans served in all branches of the American military and had struck down barriers and opened doors for their future military service. African American soldiers, airmen, sailors, and marines fought during World War II for the right to serve and fight. Their struggle for integration and equality would not end with the peace. In the post-World War II era, African Americans would demand to maintain and increase their role in the American military, a role they had earned during the grueling years of World War II. Lanning argues that it was not until after the Korean conflict, when the U.S. military was officially desegregated, that African Americans finally "tasted the fruits of racial victory" when the armed forces provided fair and equal training for all service members.

According to Bernard C. Nalty's *Long Passage to Korea: Black Sailors and the Integration of the U.S. Navy* (2003), the progress that the U.S. Navy made in the field of race

relations was a reflection of President Truman's historic Executive Order 9981; the work of the Fahy Committee, which President Truman appointed to review race relations and the progress that was made by the armed services in integrating their forces; and the manpower needs of the Korean War. During the decade following the Korean conflict, the concentrations of African Americans in the Stewards' Branch ended. African Americans in the enlisted force nevertheless totaled only about 5% during the post-World War II era. The naval officer corps of 1962 included 174 African American men and women, regulars and reservists. These figures represented a definite improvement over pre-World War II and wartime totals, but they also showed that the African American community remained a neglected national resource. It was a tragedy, Nalty argues, that the United States would have to endure battles in the courtrooms and on the streets of America, other social and political upheavals, and dissension in the American military during the 1960s and 1970s, before African Americans could become fully contributing members of the United States naval service.

According to Robert J. Schneller, Jr.'s *Breaking the Color Barrier: The U.S. Naval Academy's First African American Midshipmen and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (2005), the political pressures and manpower imperatives of a global conflict, along with an innate sense of fairness, inspired Secretary of the Navy James V. Forrestal to spearhead the campaign to revolutionize the Navy's racial policies. Under Forrestal's leadership, segregation by occupation gave way to "limited" integration. Schneller argues that by the end of the Second World War, African American sailors were no longer restricted to the messman's branch and they found that most enlisted billets were open to them, "at least in writing." Most significantly, the Navy commissioned its first African American officers. Schneller concludes that the U.S. Navy may have revolutionized its written racial policy during World War II, but it would take decades and

another upheaval in American society before the Navy's racial practices caught up with its racial policies.

This review of the sources has shown that most historians have argued that the integration of the U.S. Navy occurred after World War II had ended. This doctoral dissertation, on the other hand, argues that the Second World War, besides forcing major changes in the racial policy of the U.S. Navy, also caused some significant changes in the attitudes of American naval personnel at all levels. It is for this reason that the Second World War needs to be considered "the" critical period for bringing about the racial integration of the U.S. naval service.

Chapter 2 - “Inclusion to Increasing Exclusion”: The African American Experience in the U.S. Navy, 1755-1860

Well before their massive commitment to the Union Navy in the Civil War, African Americans served in the Navy of the United States. Beginning with the French and Indian War, they risked their freedom and their lives to help subdue the enemies of the British colonies. In the period between the French and Indian War and the Civil War, African Americans, finding limited opportunities ashore, served in the U.S. Navy because white sailors would not. This is especially true of the peacetime U.S. Navy, where conditions, pay, and discipline dissuaded most whites from enlisting. African American sailors often served with distinction.

The first African Americans enlisted in the colonial navy during the French and Indian War, when African Americans served on colonial ships-of-war and privateers. Rhode Island alone had sixty privateers on the high seas, and African Americans served on all of them. Ships such as the *Virgin Queen*, the *Invincible Shepherd*, the *Revenge*, and the *George* carried up to five African American crew members. Five of the thirty-seven crew members of the *Revenge* were African American. They served in all capacities, from cooks to able seamen and marines. African Americans and whites on vessels of war ate, slept and fought together. On privateers the African American sailors received their share of the prizes based on rank, just as white seamen did.⁷

The first large-scale enlistment of African American sailors occurred during the Revolutionary War. They served in ships of the Continental Navy and on other American ships

⁷ Lorenzo J. Greene, “The Negro in the Armed Forces of the United States, 1619-1783,” *Negro History Bulletin* 14 (1951): 123-127, 138.

of war, including those in the state navies, those operated by the Continental Army, and the hundreds of privateers commissioned by Congress.

The decision to use African American sailors during the American Revolution was an easy one because there was nothing novel about it. The waterways of the Eastern Seaboard bred African American seafaring men as well as white. African Americans had been signed aboard fishing fleets or employed on coastal vessels that sailed the bays and rivers of the Atlantic coast. African American seamen were a common sight in colonial America. Many served on merchant ships or on ships of the Royal Navy. Some African Americans who wound up in the Royal Navy had originally been crewmen of ships that British war vessels had seized while enforcing the Navigation Acts. In colonial times, service at sea often meant freedom for many slaves.⁸ One eighteenth century observer attributed the decline in the slave population of Massachusetts by 1763 to the use of African American proxies in the British Army and Royal Navy during King George's War (1744-1748) and the French and Indian War (1754-1763).⁹

The Continental Congress established a national navy in 1775. During the eight years of the Revolution, the Continental Navy commissioned around fifty vessels of wide description, from galleys and sloops to powerful thirty-two gun frigates.¹⁰ Many of these vessels began their careers as part of the colonies' commercial fleet but were hastily converted when war erupted. In similar fashion, most men who served in the Navy, including African Americans, were

⁸ Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961), 83-84.

⁹ Jeremy Belknap, "Queries Respecting the Slavery and Emancipation of Negroes in Massachusetts," *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, Series 1, vol. 4 (Boston, 1795), 199.

¹⁰ William M. Fowler, Jr., *Rebels Under Sail: The American Navy during the Revolution* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1976), 244-245.

requisitioned from merchant ships and “converted” to war duty. But the federal navy had difficulty finding enough men. In the Continental Navy, the pay was low: \$6.67 a month for an able seaman, paid in depreciated Continental currency. John Trevitt, a Marine Lieutenant in the *Columbus*, said several months’ salary “would pay for 2 pair of shoes.”¹¹ Congress also authorized the distribution of one-third of all prizes to successful crews, and later upped the division to half for merchant ships and all of the proceeds from the sale of warships and privateers. However, these inducements were not enough. The one-year enlistment, the risks associated with combat, and the limited time spent chasing British merchant ships convinced many sailors to ignore federal recruiting efforts. Sailors knew that they could do better on privateers or in state navies, which offered land grants. Federal recruiters, then, could hardly be choosy about the men who volunteered, and, at times, the service filled out a ship’s crew by impressing unwary or rum-sodden merchant sailors.¹²

So it was that the Continental Navy inducted whatever African Americans that could be had. Recruiting records indicate that the Continental Navy enlisted mostly African Americans from the North, a trend that held through the Civil War. Massachusetts, for instance, provided many African American crewmen, including captured British crewmen willing to fight against their former masters. According to existing ship rosters, once African Americans enlisted in the Continental Navy, they were not restricted to menial positions but held positions equivalent to

¹¹ John Trevitt, “Journal of John Trevitt,” printed in Charles R. Smith, Marines in the Revolution (Washington, D.C.: United States Marine Corps, 1975), p. 321; and Naval Documents of the American Revolution (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1964) vol. 4, p. 1360.

¹² Ibid., 246-250.

those of white crewmen.¹³

In the competition for the services of seamen, however, the Continental Navy was no match for the state navies. In the latter, the period of enlistment was likely to be shorter, and the range of operations was often limited to the state's own seaports and coast. A state navy, too, was likely to give a ship's crew a larger share of the prize money from captured British vessels.

Particularly because the southern state navies used a substantial number of slaves, more African Americans served in the eleven state navies than in the Continental Navy. While the Continental Navy's recruitment of African Americans was concentrated in the North, the number of African American sailors in the state fleets depended upon each state's financial ability to man its navy. The larger, more populous states attracted African Americans into service, leaving the smaller navies with fewer African American recruits. Massachusetts, New York, Maryland, Virginia and South Carolina all created navies with vessels and African American sailors in numbers comparable to the Continental Navy. Charged with protecting only the economic interests of their respective states, the state navies employed mostly small coastal vessels and few larger ships. In 1779, the Massachusetts brig *Active* carried five African American sailors, all former members of the Royal Navy. A year later, the frigate *Protector*, the largest vessel in the Massachusetts state navy, had at least two African American sailors on board. Pennsylvania and Connecticut not only employed African American sailors but African American marines as well. Besides boarding enemy ships during an engagement, marines enforced discipline among the crew and performed certain duties (such as guarding the ammunition magazine and liquor

¹³ National Archives and Records Administration, Record Group 45, "Activities of the Negro and Service in the Navy during our Different Wars"; Quarles, *Negro in the American Revolution*, pp. 84-85.

room) not trusted to common sailors.¹⁴ Therefore, African American marines at times were actually in a position of authority over white sailors, and they performed some duties white men were not trusted to undertake.

Southern state navies frequently used African Americans as pilots in unfamiliar and dangerous waters. Since the naval vessels of the state navies operated almost wholly in bays and rivers, they were primarily small craft. Even before the war, such inshore boats had often been piloted by African Americans.¹⁵

South Carolina, with the second largest state navy in the South, drew from her African American population to man her warships; the state even took out insurance policies on the slaves used as pilots and seamen, lest the government be held liable for the loss of valuable property.¹⁶ Even Georgia, a state without a significant maritime industry, protected her coastline with galleys manned by slaves.¹⁷

Virginia possessed one of the more formidable state navies, commanding about forty ships of wide variety, from galleys and armed pilot boats to full-rigged ships. Some of the larger vessels were armed with ten or more guns and manned with crews of twenty-five to over a hundred men. African American sailors fought in many of these vessels, their numbers varying from one to ten. Some signed on as free men, while others were runaways. Others, no doubt with varying degrees of compliance, fought in the place of their white owners.¹⁸

¹⁴ Ibid, 86.

¹⁵ Ibid., 87.

¹⁶ Ibid., 90.

¹⁷ E. Merton Coulter, *A Short History of Georgia* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1933), p. 154.

¹⁸ Luther P. Jackson, "Virginia Negro Soldiers and Seamen in the American Revolution," *The Journal of Negro History*, 27, (1942): 250, 257-263.

A sailor's life in Virginia's navy, while not as lucrative as service aboard a privateer, offered an attractive alternative to the rigors and routine of the Army. New recruits received a rather extensive uniform consisting of a jacket, shirts, pants, shoes, and a hat, as well as the daily ration of a half-pint of rum. As the Virginia navy's purpose was primarily defensive, its vessels cruised familiar waters and put into port more regularly than Continental navy ships or privateers. Virginia's ships were not, however, immune to death and injury, for they often clashed with British forces. For example the schooner *Liberty* fought in twenty distinct actions.¹⁹

With a little luck, sailors received generous compensation for their time in the Virginia navy. Officers and crew received prize money from the occasional capture of British vessels, and in addition to their regular pay, veterans received land grants from the Virginia government. In several cases, African American seamen, or their descendants, claimed individual grants of 2,666 acres of Ohio land, though hundred-acre parcels were much more common. Some African Americans stayed alive long enough to collect the federal pensions granted after 1818.²⁰ The most precious gift for many, though, was neither land nor pension, but their freedom. They stepped aboard the ships of the Virginia navy as slaves but left as free men. Some slaveowners, rueful of the bargain struck when danger was near, attempted to renege on their promises to free their slave proxies. Recognizing this injustice, the Virginia legislature passed an ordinance freeing all slaves who had served in their master's place.²¹

¹⁹ Ibid., 265.

²⁰ Ibid., 273.

²¹ Ibid., 254.

An important difference between the Continental and state navies was the latter's willingness to employ slaves as sailors, although, the Continental Navy did employ a few slaves. John Paul Jones brought his slaves with him aboard the *Ranger*, but overall, slave numbers remained small.²²

The southern state navies, however, used a substantial number of slaves. Some slaves entered their state navy as substitutes for owners wanting to do their part without risking their lives. For example, Lawrence Baker, a prominent Virginia slaveholder from Isle of Wight County, was called for service in the militia. Instead of enlisting he enrolled his slave David in the Virginia navy, where he fought aboard the *Patriot*.²³

Other masters formally enlisted their slaves and kept their wages. Some states enlisted slaves simply because a slave offered freedom by the United States was one slave less fighting for freedom guaranteed by the British. The widespread British policy of granting freedom to any slave who aided the British cause persuaded many state legislatures to use slave sailors rather than lose them. This situation emerged first in Virginia, where Lord Dunmore, the royal governor, offered to free all slaves "that are able and willing to bear arms, they joining his Majesty's troops... for the more speedily reducing this colony to a proper dignity." Some states, such as Virginia and Maryland, even purchased slaves for the sole purpose of manning their ships. Generally, these slaves were sold after the war ended, but two such sailors, William Bush and Jack Knight, escaped this fate. The Virginia legislature rewarded their years of service to the Virginia navy by freeing them.²⁴

²² Augustus C. Buell, *Paul Jones, Founder of the American Navy*, 2 vols. (New York, 1900), II, 341.

²³ Jackson, "Virginia Negro Seamen", pp. 254-255.

²⁴ *Journals of the Council of the State of Virginia*, vol. 3 (Richmond: Virginia Statehouse, 1790), p. 300.

Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of slaves ran away to inundate British men-of-war in the Chesapeake, fleeing slavery in all manner of watercraft from rowboats and canoes to sloops and schooners. In 1777, the Virginia Council sought to halt the flow of escaped slaves, ordering all counties with navigable waters to collect and protect all boats that might be used by fugitives. South Carolina threatened slaves caught serving the British with the death penalty, and as a warning to other slaves, the state hanged and burned a free African American pilot convicted of arming slaves.²⁵ Nevertheless, large numbers of slaves risked their lives to earn their freedom. In 1782, an American privateer captured the British sloop-of-war *Alert*, manned with a crew of forty-six, eleven of whom were former slaves. The Captain of the HMS *Commodore* found his African American pilot so valuable that he ordered him “put in a place of safety” when a battle loomed.²⁶

The supply and movement of the rebel armies around the Chesapeake demanded waterborne transportation and the use of African American sailors and pilots. In 1779, General George Washington, eager to keep these skilled African Americans out of British hands, paid out “1000 dollars promised the Negro pilots” who supplied and transported his army in the Chesapeake Bay region.²⁷

Just as the Continental Navy tended to lose men to the state navies, the state navies lost men to the privateers and vessels sailing under letters of marque. First, the period of enlistment on a privateer could be much shorter. Privateer crews could leave a ship at the end of

²⁵ Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution*, 124-128.

²⁶ Ibid., 152-154.

²⁷ George Washington to Major Henry Lee, July 26, 1779. *The Writings of George Washington*, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick 30 volumes, (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1936), Vol. 15, p. 488.

a cruise, as formal enlistment was not required. Second, there was greater opportunity for financial gain than in the formal navies. Privateers did not pay their crews wages, but the prize money from a single captured merchant vessel could easily outstrip a year's worth of formal navy wages. Also, the owners of the privateers often evaded laws requiring payment of a share of the prize money to the government and simply divided the loot equally with the crew. Third, although privateers were authorized vessels of war operating under commissions from the state authorities acting as agents of Congress, they were privately owned, manned and run. A privateer was a free-lance raider, going where and when it pleased. Privateers had no obligation to engage enemy warships, diminishing the risk of death in combat. Lastly, no strict naval discipline was enforced.²⁸ One Massachusetts observer described the swarming volunteers as "grasshoppers" and noted, "Privateering was never more in vogue." The number of privateers multiplied rapidly (136 in 1776 alone), and by the end of the war more than fifty thousand men had served on American commerce raiders.²⁹

Fugitive slaves found privateering vessels especially appealing. Most privateers did not question where a man came from, and it was unlikely that a written roster of the crew would be kept on deposit any place where it might catch the eye of a slave-catcher. Service on a privateer not only carried an escaped slave away from slavery, but it also offered him the chance to make some money.

Service on a privateer included additional risks, however. Unlike those captured by the Continental and state navies, the British treated privateers as pirates. African Americans captured

²⁸ William J. Morgan, "American Privateering in America's War for Independence," *American Neptune* 36 (1976): 79-87; Robert W. Love, *History of the U.S. Navy*, vol. 1 (Harrisburg, Pa.: Stackpole, 1992), pp. 16-17.

²⁹ Love, *History of the U.S. Navy*, I, 17.

aboard privateers, whether free or slave, faced sale into slavery in the Caribbean, where backbreaking labor in the crippling heat promised a quick and miserable death. The British imprisoned other captives aboard prison ships, notorious for their poor conditions.

Of the African Americans serving on the privateers, the most famous was James Forten, a powder boy on the *Royal Louis*. Commissioned by Pennsylvania in 1781, the *Royal Louis* was captured by the frigate *Amphyon*, assisted by two other British vessels. Forten became a playmate of the son of the *Amphyon*'s commander, but Forten resisted efforts to persuade him to renounce his American allegiance. As a consequence he was sent to the floating dungeon *Jersey*, where he spent seven months before being released in the general exchange of prisoners that took place when the war drew to a close. After the war Forten became a sailmaker in Philadelphia, eventually amassing a fortune of \$100,000, a portion of which came from his invention of a device for handling sails. Forten later used some of this great fortune to support William Lloyd Garrison and the radical wing of the abolitionist movement.³⁰

The U.S. Department of the Navy, has estimated that about 1,500 African Americans served on the ships of the Continental Navy, the state navies and the hundreds of privateers commissioned by Congress. This was approximately 10% of the rebel navies' total manpower.³¹

African American sailors shared the same fate as their white shipmates, and, by 1783, had seen the privateers returned to commercial concerns, while the state navies disbanded. Even

³⁰ Ray Allen Billington, "James Forten: Forgotten Abolitionist," *Negro History Bulletin*, 13 (1949), 31; Brenda A. Johnston, *Between the Devil and the Sea: The Life of James Forten* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1974).

³¹ U.S. Department of the Navy, *The Black Man in the Navy*. Part I, Release No. 19-71, Washington, D.C.: Office of Information, January 29, 1971.

the Continental Navy disappeared after Congress eliminated its funding as a fiscal measure, with the War Department absorbing all naval responsibilities.

The years following the 1783 Treaty of Paris provided little incentive for the creation of a respectable naval force, even though American commerce had lost the protection of the Royal Navy. A fractious Congress, operating under the Articles of Confederation, saw little need to deplete the public treasury with a strong navy. To many, a strong navy was a symbol of imperialism.

By the 1790's the situation had changed. With the increase in federal power authorized by the U.S. Constitution in 1790, Congress could more readily implement military directives. Raids on American merchant vessels in the Mediterranean by Algerian pirates prompted Congress to authorize the construction of four super-frigates to protect the interests of the United States. This was the rebirth of the U.S. Navy.

The need for a strong navy became even more apparent to some when French revolutionary privateers began raiding American ships in the Caribbean. France's seizure of American merchant vessels on the high seas forced President John Adams and Congress to create the U.S. Navy as a distinct, national naval institution. Under the terms of "An Act to Establish an Executive Department, to be Nominated the Department of the Navy," the new Navy Department assumed all responsibilities for America's naval defense and obtained the right to build, man, and maintain a total of forty-five ships.³²

Shortly before turning over authority for naval matters to the newly created Department of the Navy, Secretary of War Henry Knox issued an order forbidding the enlistment of Negroes,

³² Marshall Smelser, *Congress Founds the Navy, 1787-1798* (South Bend, Indiana: Notre Dame University Press, 1959), 43-63.

mulattoes, or Indians in the Marine Corps.³³ Later, in August 1798, Secretary of the Navy Benjamin Stoddert informed his recruiting officers that Negroes and mulattoes were not to be enlisted in the Navy.³⁴

We cannot say with certainty what motivated Knox and Stoddert to prohibit African Americans from enlisting. Perhaps Stoddert feared that African Americans in the northern states, where slavery had been nearly eradicated by this time, would turn to the Navy for employment. Another possible explanation is the apprehension felt by white Americans about the success of a slave rebellion in the French Caribbean. Led by Toussaint L'Ouverture and Benoit Joseph Rigaud, the slaves of Saint Dominique wrested most of the island from French control, though for a time the rebels professed allegiance to their former masters. When relations with France deteriorated into the Quasi-War, many Americans feared that the French navy might be used to transport an army of black revolutionaries to the United States.³⁵

In June 1798, several months before Stoddert announced his ban on African American recruits, President John Adams received a panicked letter from Secretary of War Knox condemning the nation's lack of a navy, and expressing his fear that the French in the West Indies could use seized American vessels to land "an army of ten thousand blacks and people of color" in South Carolina and Virginia.³⁶ Any invasion would be a serious matter, and though he

³³ Secretary of War Henry Knox to Lieutenant of Marines, frigate *Constellation*, March 16, 1798 in *Naval Documents related to the Quasi-War between the United States and France* ed. Office of Naval Records and Library. (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1935), vol. I, 41.

³⁴ Secretary of the Navy Benjamin Stoddert to Lieutenant Henry Kenyon, August 8, 1798 in *Naval Documents related to the Quasi-War*, vol. I., 281.

³⁵ Alexander De Conde, *The Quasi War: The Politics and Diplomacy of the Undeclared War with France, 1791-1801*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966), pp. 130-136.

³⁶ Henry Knox to President John Adams, June 26, 1798, in *Naval Documents related to the Quasi War*, vol. I, 139-141.

did not say so, the Secretary of War probably thought that such a force might touch off a series of slave rebellions.

Fears of an invasion were also increased by a report from Major Lewis Toussard of Fort Mifflin, Pennsylvania (Philadelphia), that a mutiny was in progress among the ships lying in quarantine near his fort. The instigators were alleged to be African Americans belonging to French people on board the armed ship *Melpomene*. According to the report that Toussard sent to the Secretary of War:

The boat of the sloop of war manned only with negroes, has been seen the whole day plying around all the other vessels which have negroes on board; they seem to have adopted between them the most desperate measures to the execution of which they are incited by their owners. There is now in those vessels between 250 and 300 negroes, well armed, trained to war, and saying they will land. They know no laws and count their lives for nothing.³⁷

The overwrought major must have been greatly relieved when the “imminent invasion” dissolved once the quarantine was lifted and all parties came ashore without mishap.³⁸ Toussard’s frantic appeal and the general unease felt along the Atlantic coast about an African American invasion may have contributed to the Navy’s ban of African Americans. Of course, the prohibition may have been merely a reflection of the general racism felt throughout the nation.

In any event, if the ban against African Americans was ever effective, its enforcement was short-lived. African Americans fought aboard navy vessels in the Quasi-War, the

³⁷ Major Lewis Toussard to the Secretary of War, June 27, 1798, in *Naval Documents related to the Quasi War*, vol. I, 149.

³⁸ Secretary of State Timothy Pickering to Robert Liston, British Ambassador to the United States, in *Naval Documents related to the Quasi War*, vol. I, p. 162.

undeclared naval war with France in 1798-1800. William Brown, for example, enlisted aboard the USS *Constellation* in 1798 and later received a wound in battle with the French frigate *L'Insurgente*. Another African American, George Diggs, served as a quartermaster and a petty officer aboard the USS *Experiment* in the same year. But, the most daring exploits of an African American sailor in this era belong to Moses Armstead. Captured while serving aboard the brig *Betsies*, Armstead led an uprising that killed the French prize crew and recaptured the ship. Unfortunately, the *Betsies* subsequently fell to another French ship, and Armstead spent the rest of the conflict imprisoned in Puerto Rico.³⁹

Privateers also emerged to prey on French shipping. The privateering force, nearly ten times the size of the U.S. Navy, not only seized proportionately more French ships but probably used more African American sailors. Prowling near the French sugar islands in the Caribbean, privateers needing replacement crewmen found African American sailors far more plentiful than white sailors. The Quasi-War ended in 1800, and African American sailors continued to serve in the U.S. Navy.⁴⁰

Although African American sailors fought during the Quasi-War, they were not always welcome on board ship. Indeed, just three years after the fighting ended, Captain Edward Preble and other officers warned subordinates “not to Ship Black Men.”⁴¹ This ban against African Americans in the U.S. Navy, though, was never fully enforced.

³⁹ Rayford W. Logan, “The Negro in the Quasi-War, 1798-1800,” *Negro History Bulletin* 14 (1951): 128-132.

⁴⁰ Ibid; Michael A. Palmer, *Stoddert's War: Naval Operations during the Quasi-War with France, 1798-1801* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1987), pp. 56-60.

⁴¹ Captain Edward Preble, U.S. Navy to Lt. William C. Jenckes, U.S. Navy, Providence, R.I., July 13, 1803 in *Naval Documents Related to the United States Wars With the Barbary Powers* (Washington, 1940), vol. II, p. 479.

American economic growth and navy policy in the early years of the nineteenth century also promoted African American enlistment. A booming economy created a shortage of skilled merchant seamen, and the Navy's recruiting problems continued into the early 1800s. The demand for merchant seamen increased as American merchants filled the international trade void left by the Napoleonic Wars in Europe. British and French raiding activities upon each other caused them to use American ships in their Caribbean trade, further diminishing the supply of able seamen. High merchant wages of thirty to thirty-five dollars per month outstripped the meager wages of the Navy, set at ten dollars per month for ordinary sailors since 1798. African Americans, searching for employment, opportunities, solved some of the Navy's enlistment problems.⁴²

The growing American maritime trade increased the friction between the United States and the warring states in Europe. In addition to restraining American vessels from carrying enemy goods, the British policy of monitoring and harassing U.S. merchant ships on the high seas included random searches for deserters from His Majesty's Navy. Attracted by higher pay and relatively humane discipline, large numbers of British sailors deserted the Royal Navy and merchant service and joined the U.S. Navy. Refusing to recognize the American naturalization process, the British demanded the right to search American ships on the high seas in order to "impress" deserters back into the Royal Navy. The most famous "impressment" incident occurred in 1807, when the British warship HMS *Leopard* forced the USS *Chesapeake* to heave to for boarding by firing on it, killing three men. The attackers then boarded the American naval vessel and removed four men, including an African American sailor, whom they claimed were

⁴² Spencer C. Tucker, *The Jeffersonian Gunboat Navy* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), pp. 65-77.

subjects of the British king. The incident inflamed American opinion and contributed to the outbreak of war between the United States and Great Britain in 1812. As a direct result of the *Chesapeake-Leopard* incident, Congress forbade the enlistment of foreign nationals in the U.S. Navy, and the importance of African American sailors increased accordingly.⁴³

Opposed to the massive naval spending policies of George Washington and John Adams, President Thomas Jefferson favored a system of coastal fortifications and small gunboats to defend American interests abroad. Jefferson's gunboat fleet consisted of some 177 wooden boats, seventy-five feet long, propelled by oars or sails, each carrying a few cannon. Poorly designed, the stodgy and inadequately-sailed vessels were difficult to handle and dangerous in anything but enclosed waters. Designed for forty-man crews, the gunboats during wartime frequently held nearly seventy. During peacetime, however, the Navy found few recruits willing to serve on the gunboats, and often individual states had to press militiamen into gunboat service. Desertion from the gunboat service remained a constant problem. One officer lamented, "This crime happens so frequently . . . we shall never be able to put a stop to it." Desperate for crewmen for the gunboats, the Navy turned to African American sailors.⁴⁴

African Americans also found useful employment with the Navy during the growing conflict with the Barbary pirates in the early nineteenth century. With a sailor's deployment to the Mediterranean lasting as long as five years, the Navy struggled to find recruits. African American sailors helped fill the void once again. The Navy quickly built ships suitable to fight pirates on a foreign shore, but Jefferson still opposed a large navy. Most of the new ships were

⁴³ Ira Dye, *The Fatal Cruise of the Argus: Two Captains in the War of 1812* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1994), pp. 44-45.

⁴⁴ Tucker, *Jeffersonian Gunboat Navy*, 72-74.

small coastal sloops and gunboats. When the conflict with the pirates ended in 1815, the Navy had only four frigates ready for service, seven others in need of major repairs, ten small sloops, and the gunboats, which were of questionable quality.⁴⁵

The continued British interference with American shipping helped trigger American entry into the War of 1812. Congress voted for a vast expansion of the U.S. Navy. At the outbreak of hostilities, the Navy was composed of ten frigates constructed during the Washington and Adams administrations, eight small brigantines, and seventy-two gunboats. In comparison, the Royal Navy's fleet had ninety-seven warships, including six ships of the line and thirty-three frigates. In addition, America's watery border with British Canada lay open, although American and British naval forces on the Great Lakes began the war on equal footing.⁴⁶

There was now a great demand for men to sail the Navy's new ships, and sailors, as always, were in short supply. An act of Congress in 1812 allowed the navy 4,273 billets, allotting 2,987 to enlisted men. The Navy exceeded that number, however, with 10,617 officers and men (including 405 sailors in prisoner-of-war camps) in the service in October 1814. Even in exceeding the manpower allotment, the Navy faced constant manpower shortages. The pay on merchant vessels was higher, and the Navy could not match their wages. Naval service also entailed the risk of life and limb. Despite some notable American successes in ship-to-ship duels, the Royal Navy still held the upper hand.

⁴⁵ Glenn Tucker, *Dawn like Thunder: The Barbary Wars and the Birth of the U.S. Navy* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), pp. 290-291.

⁴⁶ Edward K. Eckert, *The Navy Department in the War of 1812* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1973), p. 14.

During the War of 1812, the U.S. Navy openly enlisted and officially accepted free African Americans. They were formally welcomed on board by an Act of Congress in March 1813. The Naval Act of March 3, 1813 stated:

That from and after the termination of the war in which the United States are now engaged with Great Britain, it shall not be lawful to employ on board any of the public or private vessels of the United States any person or persons except citizens of the United States, or persons of colour, natives of the United States.⁴⁷

African Americans fought on warships and privateers, on the high seas and the Great Lakes, before the law took effect, so the act merely brought policy into line with existing practice.

During the War of 1812, the proportion of African Americans in the ships' crews varied from one-fourth to one-eighth.⁴⁸ We have references to African Americans serving with Oliver Hazard Perry at the Battle of Lake Erie, and in various capacities elsewhere. From the available evidence, it appears that African Americans once again performed well.⁴⁹

But service on the Great Lakes was not popular with sailors. Remote and unsettled, the inland lakes offered all the possibility of death in battle with little chance of prize money or the usual seaport recreations. Fearing a British invasion from Canada, the Navy took extreme measures to man the Great Lakes fleet. For example, in 1813 the Navy transferred the entire crew, officers and men, of the USS *Congress* to the Great Lakes.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Herbert Aptheker, "Negro in the Union Navy," *Journal of Negro History*, vol. 32 (April 1947): 169-200.

⁴⁸ Letter, Secretary of the Navy John D. Long to Representative C. E. Littlefield, 2 April 1902, *Blacks in the United States Armed Forces: Basic Documents*, eds. Morris J. MacGregor and Bernard C. Nalty, (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, 1977), Vol. 2, p. 186.

⁴⁹ N.V. *Activities of the Negro and Services in the Navy during our different Wars*, Record Group 45, National Archives.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 50.

Because of the unpopularity of Great Lakes duty, as many as one-half of Commodore Oliver H. Perry's men on the Great Lakes were African American, in part lured by the 25% wage increase offered to volunteers for Great Lakes duty. Perry's own flagship, the USS *Lawrence*, featured men from a contingent of "three hundred and sixty colored Marines, in military pomp and naval array."⁵¹

In 1814, African American sailors played a pivotal role in reversing a British advance through Lake Champlain. One observer reported, "About one in twelve of the crews were black" aboard the U.S. gunboats defending the lake. Among the sailors cited for exceptional bravery in the after-battle report was African American seaman John Day, a gunner aboard the galley *Viper*. Another African American cited for bravery was Charles Black, a former privateer who used his profits to buy his freedom. Captured on a privateer by the British, Black escaped from the infamous Dartmoor Prison in England, returned to the United States, and enlisted in the U.S. Navy.⁵²

In high-seas combat, African American sailors also showed their bravery and skill. Captain Isaac Hull, commander of the famed USS *Constitution*, "Old Ironsides," credited many of his men for bravery after defeating the British frigate *Guerriere* in 1812. Hull praised the ability of his African American sailors as a group, although he used terms that would be considered unacceptable today: "I never had any better fighters than those niggers, -they stripped to the waist, & fought like devils, sir, seeming to be utterly insensible to danger & to be

⁵¹ Martin R. Delany, *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States*. (Philadelphia, 1852), p. 83.

⁵² Joseph T. Wilson, *The Black Phalanx: A History of the Negro Soldiers of the United States*. Hartford, Connecticut: American Publishing, 1890, p. 78; Michael H. Goodman, "The Black Tar: Negro Seamen in the Union Navy, 1861-1865." (Ph.D. diss., University of Nottingham, 1975), p. 71.

possessed with a determination to outfight white sailors.” The USS *Hornet*, commanded by Captain James Lawrence, defeated the HMS *Peacock* in a ship-to-ship duel with half the American crew made up of African Americans.

Just like in the Revolutionary War, more than one American navy went off to battle the British in 1812. Privateers appeared in large numbers, and African Americans went to sea looking for profits. Lured by the chance for quick wealth, privateer recruiters filled their quotas almost overnight. One privateer captain in Philadelphia filled his ship “in less than one hour”; a captain in Charleston signed up 130 men in six hours. The large numbers of privateers, however, outstripped the supply of available seamen. Also, many men who served on privateers deserted their ships after finding that pirate life was not as romantic as they thought. Many privateers proceeded to hire professional recruiting agents to find sailors, but the agents were less than discriminating. Many privateers set sail with “illegal crewmen”: British deserters, underage boys, or even drunks who passed out in a tavern only to wake up on a privateer. Runaway slaves were another source of manpower, and newspapers in coastal cities regularly featured rewards for escaped slaves serving aboard privateers. The *Baltimore Federal Gazette* offered a reward of forty dollars for the return of one escaped slave backed by a promise to sue the offending ship owner. As in the Revolutionary War, masters sent their slaves to sea to collect the wages for themselves. Andrew Crawford, a Baltimore physician, enlisted his slave aboard the privateer *Tom*. William Wade, captain of the privateer *Chassuer*, collected not only his prize money but also the funds of his slave, Joseph Kingsbury, a crewman aboard the ship. ⁵³

⁵³ Jerome R. Garitee, *The Republic's Private Navy: The American Privateering Business as Practiced by Baltimore during the War of 1812* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1977), pp. 128, 136-137; *Baltimore Federal Gazette*, December 30, 1813, p. 12.

The last “navy” to employ African American sailors during the War of 1812 consisted of “letters of marque” ships, armed merchant ships empowered to seize enemy merchantmen in the course of their normal trade. For various reasons, the letters of marque ships offered more opportunities to African American seamen than even the privateers. Letter of marque ships did not actively search for enemy merchant vessels. With the chances of prize money relatively slim, white sailors preferred privateers, opening billets for African American sailors. Letter of marque ships paid regular wages, but privateers offered more of a chance for a quick dollar, luring many white sailors. Marque ships required fewer crewmen to sail the ship, therefore less men were needed. Whites looking for a means of employment turned to the privateers, which carried far more men of various experience levels. The resulting shortage of trained crewmen forced many marque ships to set sail with skeleton crews. The brig *Charles*, for example, shipped out with only seven enlisted men, five of them African American. Another ship, the *Courier*, sailed out of Baltimore with a crew that included an “apprentice boy of Colour” only eight years old.⁵⁴

The end of the War of 1812 did not bring about a significant reduction in the number of African American sailors, because the Act of March 3, 1813 provided for the continued enlistment of African Americans. For the next twenty-six years, there was very little change regarding African American enlistments. The presence of African American sailors became a matter of routine. In 1815 the War Department directed the discharge of all “soldiers of color as being unfit to associate with American soldiers.” The Navy on the other hand, never subscribed to this harsh attitude; it could ill afford to ban veteran sailors, and African Americans continued to serve.

⁵⁴ Garitee, *Republic's Private Navy*, pp.130-131.

Despite Southern attempts to restrict their movements with the Negro Seaman Acts, African American sailors continued to enlist in the Navy in substantial numbers throughout the 1820s and 1830s. In a letter on recruiting activities in Philadelphia in September of 1827, for example, Commodore William Bainbridge told Secretary of the Navy Samuel L. Southard that of the 102 men enlisted, eighteen were “Blacks.” When Commodore Isaac Hull freed his slave, John Ambler, in 1835, Ambler promptly enlisted in the U.S. Navy. Ambler wrote to Mrs. Hull and asked her to influence her husband to get Ambler assigned to the commodore’s ship. African American sailors went everywhere U.S. ships sailed, including Europe. Apparently, the USS *Constellation* was manned by a substantial number of African American sailors on its 1832 Mediterranean cruise. Once an all African American crew manned one of the cutters, causing a group of Europeans to conclude that all Americans were black, and that their white officers were really Englishmen. African American sailors also participated in an 1837 naval exploration expedition in Florida.⁵⁵

These vignettes suggest that the presence of African Americans on board U.S. Navy vessels was fairly common in the decades before 1860. There was a similar situation in the Navy’s system of shipyards. African Americans maintained the U.S. Navy’s system of yards, despite the following 1818 directive:

No Slaves or Negroes are to be employed in the navy yards of the Unites States, without express orders of the secretary of the navy or [his advisory body of navy

⁵⁵ Captain William Bainbridge to Samuel L. Southard, September 14, 1827, “Captains Letters, July-October 1827,” 51, Record Group 45, National Archives; Bruce Grant, *Captain of the Old Ironsides* (Chicago: Pellegrini and Cudahy, 1947), p. 326; Nathaniel P. Willis, *Summer Cruise in the Mediterranean on Board an American Frigate* (Rochester, N.Y.: Alden and Beardsley, 1856), p. 103; James F. Sunderman, ed., *Journey into Wilderness: An Army Surgeon’s Account of Life in Camp and Field during the Creek and Seminole Wars 1836-1838* by Jacob Rhett Motte (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1963), p. 169.

officers] the Board of Navy Commissioners.

Slaves are not to be borne on the books of the vessels of the United States; nor shall any person compose part of the crew of any vessel of the United States, who has not voluntarily entered the service.⁵⁶

The directive was intended to reserve federal jobs for white applicants at shore establishments, but African Americans continued to work at them. Most of the laborers were slaves contracted to the Navy in exchange for their wages, a sum much less than the cost of white workers. When building a stone dry dock at the Norfolk Navy yard, for example, the Navy replaced white stonecutters, who received \$1.50 per day, with slaves, whose owners collected 72 cents per day. The new naval yard constructed at Pensacola, Florida, during the 1830s mostly used slaves because an insufficient number of whites applied for employment.⁵⁷

Slaves also served aboard ships on the high seas. Many officers brought their slaves with them when they went to sea, placing the name of their slave on their ship's roster and collecting their wages. Often, shore-based officers supplemented their lower income by enlisting their slaves as apprentices and sending them to sea. Civilian masters also continued to find maritime employment for their slaves in order to collect their salaries.⁵⁸

In 1839, William McNally, an ex-U.S. Navy gunner, published a book in which he charged that in 1834 slaves had been employed at the Norfolk Navy Yard to the exclusion of white and free African Americans. He also said that slaves had been entered on the books of the

⁵⁶ Rules, Regulations, and Instructions for the Naval Service, 20 April 1818, 15th Cong., 1st sess., *American State Papers, Naval Affairs*.

⁵⁷ Philip S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States* vol. 1, *From Colonial Times to the Founding of the American Federation of Labor* (New York: International, 1947), pp. 261-262; Robert S. Starobin, *Industrial Slavery in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 32.

⁵⁸ Christopher McKee, *A Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession: The Creation of the U.S. Naval Officer Corps* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1991), p. 333.

frigate *Java*, and that their masters drew their pay. McNally's charges may have prompted the issuing of a new set of regulations governing recruiting. These regulations stated: "Free Blacks and other colored persons are only to be entered by [with] the approbation of the Commander of the station." They also said that no slave was to be "entered for the naval service or to form a part of the Complement of any Vessel of War of the United States."⁵⁹

This may have resolved the matter of slaves, but in September 1839, Acting Secretary of the Navy Isaac Chauncey, admitted that the Navy Department had received a number of complaints about the number of "...blacks and other colored persons entered at some of the recruiting stations, and the consequent underproportion [sic] of white persons transferred to seagoing vessels." Secretary Chauncey therefore ordered that in the future the number of "colored persons" enlisted during any weekly or monthly period should not exceed five percent of the whole number of white persons enlisted. Also, "under no circumstances whatever" were slaves to be enlisted.⁶⁰ The five percent quota remained official policy until the Civil War, and African Americans constituted only 2.5% of the personnel of the United States Navy when the Civil War broke out in April of 1861.⁶¹

After the War of 1812, the United States did not fight a foreign power for more than thirty years. Friction generated by the American annexation of Texas erupted into a war with Mexico in 1846. The naval war against Mexico proved very different from earlier American wars, but African American service continued. Approximately one thousand African American

⁵⁹ William McNally, *Evils and Abuses in the Naval and Merchant Service, Exposed; with Proposals for their Remedy and Redress* (Boston, 1839), p. 121; Recruiting Service Regulation, July 1, 1839, Subject File *NR-Navy Personnel-Recruiting and Enlistment*, box 1, Record Group 45, National Archives.

⁶⁰ Circular, Department of the Navy, 13 September 1839, *Regulations, Circulars, Orders, and Decisions for the Guide of Officers of the Navy of the United States*, Washington, DC, 1851.

⁶¹ Dennis J. Ringle, *Life in Mr. Lincoln's Navy* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1998), p. 21.

sailors served in the Mexican War. The large numbers of African Americans, slave and free, who were employed in the coastal shipping industry were ideal for the small vessels used against Mexico. Many in the U.S. Navy mistakenly believed that African Americans had a natural immunity to yellow fever and other tropical diseases. Based upon this erroneous assumption, the Navy sent many African American sailors to the Gulf of Mexico to replace sick white sailors. The full extent of African American service during the Mexican War is difficult to determine. No one has attempted an extensive study of naval recruiting records, and a shortage of personal recollections from enlisted naval personnel offers little chance to identify African Americans in the historical narrative.⁶²

For the federal military forces, the American Civil War would once again create a shortage of manpower. This led to the continued enlistment of African Americans into the U.S. Army and Navy. African Americans would play an important role in Union naval operations and perform admirably.

⁶² Robert E. Greene, *Black Defenders of America, 1775-1973* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing, 1974), p. 43; W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African-American Seaman in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 215-232; Goodman, "Black Tar," 1-15; David Connor Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, volume 3, pp. 323-330.

Chapter 3 - “Service with and without restrictions”: The African American Experience in the U.S. Navy, 1861-1941

During the Civil War, a substantial number of escaped slaves and other African Americans served in the Navy. Reliance on racially integrated crews survived beyond the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, only to succumb to the principle of “separate but equal,” validated by the Supreme Court in the *Plessy* case (1896). As racial segregation took hold and the era of segregation began, the U.S. Navy separated African Americans from whites, a task completed by the American entrance into World War I in 1917. The Navy paid the price in lost efficiency to maintain its racial policy during that conflict and afterward. After World War I, the Navy evaluated their wartime experiences and sought to determine the future of the African American sailor. The Navy, its wartime ranks about 1% African American, chose to accept African Americans solely for duty as messmen and stewards.⁶³

The American Civil War once again created a manpower crisis, which led to the enlistment of African Americans. They were enlisted in large numbers into the U.S. Army and Navy. African American sailors played an important role in the operations of the U.S. Navy during the Civil War, serving on many famous vessels during the war. African American seamen served on David G. Farragut’s *Hartford* at Mobile Bay, the *Kearsage*, which sank the CSS *Alabama*, and at least three African Americans were on board the Union Navy’s first ironclad *Monitor* when she sank in a storm off Cape Hatteras on December 31, 1862.

As pilots, landsmen, sailors, and cooks, African Americans rendered valuable assistance to the Union naval war effort. On some ships they represented from 15% to 80% of the crew.

⁶³ Frederick S. Harrod, *Manning the New Navy: The Development of a Modern Naval Enlisted Force, 1899-1940*, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1978), p. 183.

For example, African Americans made up 242, or 25%, of the *New Hampshire's* crew of 969; thirty-five, or 53%, of the sixty-six members of the Steamer *Argosy*; thirty, or 78%, of the thirty-eight crewmembers of the gunboat *Mendota*; and nineteen, or 16%, of a total complement of 115 on the ram *Avenger*.⁶⁴

It is obvious that many African Americans enlisted in the Union Navy, and while precise figures are not available, they formed a larger proportion of the Union Navy than they did in the Union Army. But approximating the number of African Americans who served in the U.S. Navy during the Civil War was and still is difficult.

African Americans from the Northern states and the freedmen of the South constituted a significant element in the Union Navy, though until recently estimates of their participation have been overstated. In 1902, Secretary of the Navy John Long answered an inquiry from Congressman C. E. Littlefield:

There are no specific figures found in this office relating to the number of colored men enlisted in the U.S. Navy 1861-1865. The total number of colored men enlisted in the U.S. Navy from March 4, 1861 to May 1, 1865, was 118,044. During the War of 1812 and up to 1860 the proportion of colored men in the ship's crews varied from one-fourth to one-sixth and one-eighth of the total crew . . . In the absence of specific data it is suggested that as several vessels report during the Civil War having a crew of one-fourth negroes that the actual number of enlistment must have been about one-fourth of the total number given above or 29,511.⁶⁵

These figures remained essentially unchallenged until 1973, when historian David L. Valuska's doctoral dissertation revised it downward to slightly less than ten thousand men, based

⁶⁴ Muster Rolls of Vessels, Record Group 24, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

⁶⁵ Letter, Secretary of the Navy John D. Long to Rep. C.E. Littlefield, 2 April 1902, *Blacks in the United States Armed Forces: Basic Documents*, eds. Morris J. Macgregor and Bernard C. Nalty, (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, 1977), Vol. 2, p. 186.

upon his survey of surviving enlistment records.⁶⁶ Over the past decade, the African American Sailors Project cosponsored by the Naval Historical Center, the National Park Service, and Howard University, has examined a fuller array of records than earlier researchers, working as individuals, had been able to explore.⁶⁷ As a result, nearly 20,000 thousand men and eleven women who served in the U.S. Navy during the Civil War have been identified by name.⁶⁸ At approximately 17% percent of the navy's total enlisted force, African American sailors constituted a significant segment of naval manpower and nearly double the proportion of African American soldiers who served in the U.S. Army during the war. The African American Sailors Project has also documented that African Americans served in an integrated basis on board nearly all of the Union Navy's 700 vessels.⁶⁹

When the Civil War began, African Americans, limited by restrictions set by the Navy Department, made up only 5% of the fleet's crewmen. Manpower shortages, always a problem in the U.S. Navy, provided the impetus to increase African American recruitment. During the first year of the war, the number of U.S. Navy ships increased from seventy-six to 671, and from 1861 to 1865 the United States commissioned a total of 1,059 ships. Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles lifted the 5% quota on African American enlistment on September 20, 1861, but

⁶⁶ David L. Valuska, "The Negro in the Union Navy, 1861-1865" (Ph.D. dissertation, Lehigh University, 1973), which was published in a slightly modified form as *The African American in the Union Navy: 1861-1865* (1993).

⁶⁷ Joseph P. Reidy, "Black Jack: African American Sailors in the Civil War Navy," in *New Interpretations in Naval History: Selected Papers from the Twelfth Naval History Symposium Held at the United States Naval Academy, 26-27 October 1995*, ed. William B. Cogar (1997), pp. 213-220.

⁶⁸ Joseph P. Reidy, "Black Men in Navy Blue during the Civil War," *Prologue: Quarterly of the National Archives and Records Administration*, Fall 2001, vol. 33, no. 3, p. 2.

⁶⁹ Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy, and Leslie S. Rowland, *The Black Military Experience. Series II of Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867* (1982), p. 733.

limited their service aboard ship to positions of servants, cooks, and assistant gunners, or powder boys. Freemen from the North filled most of these expanded billets, but as more ships were launched and more white crewmen succumbed to disease along the Southern blockade, Welles authorized the recruitment of fugitive slaves or “contrabands” in the spring of 1862. At the same time, he opened all enlisted positions to African American sailors but denied them promotion to petty or commissioned officer.⁷⁰

African Americans proved to be one of the Union Navy’s best sources of personnel, and during the Civil War, freemen from the Northern states continued to be recruited. Serious manpower problems forced the Navy to enlist contrabands from the Southern states. Welles agreed to allow contrabands to be enlisted as early as July 1861. Later, a restriction was adopted by Welles, decreeing no more than 5% of a ship’s complement could be made up of contrabands, but the rule was rarely enforced by the Navy. The percentage of African Americans serving in the Navy eventually increased as the war progressed. Union Flag Officer Samuel F. Du Pont confided to his wife: “Everyone wants contrabands...I always say yes, if you can find them; plenty ashore is the answer.”⁷¹

Most ship captains followed Secretary Welles’s directions regarding African Americans and integrated them into all shipboard responsibilities. All across the Navy, African American sailors proved themselves equal to their tasks. Of the 1,522 Medals of Honor awarded during the

⁷⁰ Report of Secretary of the Navy, December 7, 1863, serial number 1183, p. 11; Report of the Secretary of the Navy, December 5, 1864, serial number 1221, p. 23; from 1861 to 1865 a total of 1,059 vessels were commissioned by the Navy. These are listed by name in the *ORN*, series 2, vol. I, pp. 15-23.

⁷¹ William N. Still, Jr. “The Yankee Blue Jacket,” in William N. Still, Jr., John M. Taylor, and Norman C. Delaney, *Raiders & Blockaders: The American Civil War Afloat* (Washington: Brassey’s, 1998), p. 56.

Civil War, U.S. naval personnel received 307. Of this number, eight were awarded to African American sailors.⁷²

Robert Blake became the first African American sailor to receive the Congressional Medal of Honor. An escaped slave, Blake served aboard the U.S. steam gunboat *Marblehead*. The *Marblehead* was lying at anchor in the Stono River of Legarville, South Carolina in the early morning hours of Christmas Day, 1863, when Confederate batteries fired upon it from nearby John's Island. Blake, a steward, could have hidden below decks but instead took the place of an injured powder-boy. He continually supplied the rifled gun during the 14-hour battle, all the while, exposed to enemy fire.⁷³ Fire from Blake's gun crew eventually forced the rebels to retire from their position. Blake attracted the attention of his commanding officer, Lieutenant Commander Richard W. Meade, who reported, "Robert Blake, a contraband excited my admiration by the cool and brave manner in which he served the rifle gun." According to the Navy, Blake, "serving as a powder boy, displayed extraordinary courage, alacrity, and intelligence in the discharge of his duties under trying circumstances and merited the admiration of all."⁷⁴

Another Medal of Honor was earned by Joachim Pease of New York, a gun loader on the USS *Kearsage*. Pease and fourteen other African American men served aboard the USS *Kearsage*, a full-rigged steamer carrying a complement of 163 men. Patrolling off the French

⁷² U.S. Bureau of Naval Personnel, *Medal of Honor, 1861-1949* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Navy, 1950), 13-57; Melanie Billings-Yun et al., eds., *Above and Beyond: A History of the Medal of Honor from the Civil War to Vietnam* (Boston: Boston Publishing, 1985) pp. 5, 16.

⁷³ Irvin H. Lee, *Negro Medal of Honor Men* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1967), pp. 35-38. Cited hereafter as *Negro Medal of Honor Men*. See also, *Record of Medals of Honor, Issued to the Officers and Enlisted Men of the United States Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard, 1862-1917* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1917), p. 14.

⁷⁴ ORN, Ser. 1, 15: 190-91, 21.

coast, the *Kearsage* had the good fortune to trap the *Alabama*, the most successful Confederate commerce raider of the war, in Cherbourg harbor. The superior firepower and gunnery of the *Kearsage* sank the *Alabama* after a furious one-hour battle. Captain Winslow of the *Kearsage*, in submitting Pease's name to the Secretary of the Navy for special attention, declared that Pease had "exhibited marked coolness and good conduct under fire." His immediate superior officer, Acting Master D. H. Sumner, reported to the ship's Executive Officer, the day following the battle that "... no one could be distinguished from another in courage or fortitude...among those showing still higher qualifications [was] Joachim Pease [colored seaman], loader of the same [N.1] gun. The conduct of the latter in battle fully "sustained his reputation as one of the best men in the ship."⁷⁵

Landsman John Lawson earned the Medal of Honor for his actions aboard the USS *Hartford* during the battle of Mobile Bay in 1864.⁷⁶ John Lawson, manning the ammunition hoist, stayed at his post after "a shell killed or wounded the whole number" of men in the area. Lawson was thrown violently against the bulkhead and was severely wounded in both legs. As soon as he recovered, he was begged by his shipmates to go below for medical attention; he refused, went back to his post, and supplied the *Hartford's* gun crews with shot and powder for the duration of the action. The *Hartford's* fast, accurate gunfire helped the Union Navy win the day at Mobile Bay.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ *ORN*, vol. 3, p. 67; *Medals of Honor*, p. 90.

⁷⁶ Landsmen were unskilled men who performed a variety of menial tasks in all divisions on board ship. Throughout the 19th century, "landsman" was also the service designation for domestics, and It is likely that many of the African Americans in this classification performed the duties of messmen, a category not created until 1893.

⁷⁷ *ORN*, ser. 1, 21: 408-9, 436-37, 447-48, 451-452.

On March 17, 1865, Aaron Anderson, a landsman serving aboard the USS *Wyandank*, distinguished himself in a sharp engagement with Confederate batteries on Virginia's Mattox Creek. As part of a boat crew clearing the creek, Anderson carried out his duties courageously in the face of devastating fire, which cut away half the oars, pierced the launch in many places and cut the barrel off a musket.⁷⁸

The record of African American naval bravery was not confined to the wearers of the uniform. A slave, Robert Smalls, performed one of the most daring acts of the Civil War. Early on the morning of May 13, 1862, Robert Smalls and seven fellow slave-sailors of the three-hundred-ton, side-wheel steamer *Planter* waited until white crewmembers went ashore. They then loaded their own families aboard and sailed out of Charleston harbor. Smalls, a sailmaker and ship's pilot, hoisted a white bed sheet and sailed toward the Union blockade offshore, where he delivered the ship and its cargo of supplies and munitions to a Union captain, declaring, "I thought the *Planter* might be of some use to Uncle Abe."⁷⁹

In addition to their freedom, Smalls and his fellow crewmembers received a prize payment for the ship and its contents. Smalls served for the remainder of the Civil War as a pilot, exploiting his excellent knowledge of the South Carolina coast and intercoastal waterways. After the war he attained an education and in 1876 became a member of the South Carolina Congress, where he served five terms.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ *Medals of Honor*, p. 7; Aptheker, "Negro in the Union Navy," p. 193 and Lee, Negro Medal of Honor Men, pp. 48-50.

⁷⁹ Edward A. Miller, Jr., *Gullah Statesman: Robert Smalls from Slavery to Congress, 1839-1915* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), 1-7.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

The “*Waring* incident” is another illustration of African American naval bravery during the Civil War. On July 7, 1861, the Confederate privateer *Jeff Davis* captured the cargo-laden Union schooner *S. J. Waring* enroute to South America from New York. The Confederates removed the *S. J. Waring*’s crew and put them on the *Jeff Davis*, except for William Tillman, an African American steward, and two others, whom they left as cooks and stewards. They then placed a prize crew of five aboard to sail the captured vessel to Charleston, South Carolina, where they planned to impress the boat into the Rebel navy and to sell Tillman and his African American mates into slavery. A hundred miles from Charleston, at midnight on July 16, Tillman, killed three of the Confederate crewmen with a hatchet and captured the other two. With the help of his fellow stewards and the captured Rebel sailors, Tillman sailed the *S. J. Waring* back to New York. The vessel arrived in New York harbor on July 21, 1862. Tillman later received \$6,000 in prize money. ⁸¹

The “*Enchantress* affair” was still another example of African American bravery during the war. The *Enchantress* had been captured by a Confederate privateer, and her crew was replaced with one exception. This exception was twenty-five year old African American steward Jacob Garrick. When the captured vessel came within sight of one of the Union blockading ships, the Confederates hoisted a Union Flag in an effort to get by. Garrick, then out on deck, dove overboard and alerted the Union vessel of the true identity of the now Confederate *Enchantress*. ⁸²

But not all of the African Americans who fought and died in the Union Navy were Americans. Slavery had scattered Africans over the surface of the globe. Black sailors from

⁸¹ C.R. Gibbs, “Blacks in the Union Navy,” *Negro History Bulletin*, volume 36, no.6, (1973), p. 138.

⁸² Ibid.

thirty nations served in the Federal Navy, the majority sailing out of the Caribbean and Canada. Together they accounted for 11% of the total number of African Americans in the Union Navy.⁸³ Many of the foreigners joined the Northern cause because they were experienced seamen and the Union Navy sought their services. But for others, fighting in the Union Navy gave free blacks of the world a chance to strike a blow against one of the last slave societies in the Western Hemisphere.

Battle casualty statements, as given in the *Reports* of the Secretary of the Navy for the Civil War period as well as in the *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies*, when supplemented by checking original muster rolls, reveal that African Americans were killed, captured and wounded in action aboard at least forty-nine different naval vessels. The first recorded African American naval casualties were the deaths, in action, of Robert McKinsey and Robert Willinger on January 31, 1862, aboard the *Keystone State* off Charleston, South Carolina, while the last were the deaths in action of G. D. Andrews and James Glen, aboard the *Althea* in Mobile Bay on April 12, 1865.⁸⁴

The problems facing one trying to find the number of combat casualties suffered by African Americans are many, and the hope of definite numbers is illusory. Once again, correspondence engendered by inquisitive folk in the early part of the twentieth century offers us some help. In response to other queries, Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels in 1913. stated

⁸³ Valuska, *The African American in the Union Navy: 1861-1865*, p. 86.

⁸⁴ Tables listing the names, where available, and other details of African Americans killed in action, and the numbers and other details of those wounded and captured, totaling about 200, as obtained from the muster rolls of vessels – together with comments on the great limitations of those sources can be found in Herbert Aptheker “Negro Casualties in the Civil War,” *Journal of Negro History*, volume 32 (January 1947): pp. 10-80. It is here that Aptheker estimated that at a minimum, about three thousand African Americans serving in the Union Navy died from disease and enemy action during the Civil War.

that the best official figures on casualties in the Union Navy showed a total of 3,220 killed, wounded, and missing. And this, he asserted was "...known to be a very low estimate." About 17% of the total reported battle casualties were suffered by African Americans, or that of the 3,220 men listed as killed, wounded, and missing, approximately 547 were African American.⁸⁵

Up to this point, mortality from disease in the Union Navy has not been studied by naval scholars. No figure for this appears to be available, but it is reasonable to assume that deaths from sickness far outnumbered those from battle in the Navy, as they did in the Army. In the Army, while about eleven thousand members of African American regiments were killed *and* wounded, about thirty thousand died from disease. Thus, one has an approximate ratio between deaths from disease and *all* battle casualties of about three to one. Applying this ratio to the approximate number of 547 battle casualties among African Americans in the Union Navy would lead us to believe that something like 1,641 African American members of the Union Navy died of disease. Since African Americans were used, in large part, in the most dangerous and punishing types of work and were specifically used to replace whites during the "sickly season," it may be that in the Union Navy, as in the Army, disease hit the African American with greater severity than it did the whites.⁸⁶

The defeat of the Confederacy and the abolition of slavery in the United States ended forever the need for the U.S. Navy to patrol off the coast of Africa to prevent the importation of slaves, a mission the Navy had begun in 1843. Tensions with Great Britain, America's foe

⁸⁵ Daniels to the Rev. Mr. Huddleston of Wellington, Ohio, dated June 10, 1913, in file No. 11954, in Navy Department Records, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

⁸⁶ Lt. Comdr. K.R. Breese informed Rear Admiral Foote that the sickly season was approaching, that last year half the crews were prostrated, and since the ships were already short-handed, "God help us this year." – dated Yazoo River, Mississippi, May 5, 1863, in *ORN*, Series 1, volume 24, p. 653.

during the American Revolution and the War of 1812, eased after the Civil War. Moreover, the Navy played no role in the years known as “Reconstruction” (1865-1877). No new potential enemy appeared, so there was no need for a powerful naval force. The U.S. Navy would have to shrink. As the U.S. Navy’s manpower numbers dwindled to 5,000, a number closer to pre-Civil War dimensions, it was clear that the naval service would need fewer African Americans.⁸⁷

During the late nineteenth century, although the U.S. Navy preferred to enlist experienced men, it placed few restrictions on the type of recruit it sought to fill up its vessels. In 1870, for example, the Bureau of Equipment and Recruiting, which was responsible for enlisted personnel, replied to an officer’s query about “what portion or percentage of the [naval] recruits are to be colored men” by stating that they “may be enlisted without other limits” than those governing general recruitment.⁸⁸

The levels of African American enlistment reflected this policy: African Americans constituted 10% of all enlistees in 1870, 14% in 1880, and 9.5% in 1890.⁸⁹ Once aboard navy ships, African Americans served as seamen, firemen, jacks-of-the-dust (storekeepers), carpenters, water tenders, oilers, and other specialists. Since men ate and slept in the company of shipmates performing similar shipboard functions, this integration of work assignments produced integrated messing and berthing. A few African Americans even became petty officers.

⁸⁷ James Baker Farr, *Black Odyssey: The Seafaring Traditions of Afro-Americans* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), 142.

⁸⁸ William Reynolds to Rear Admiral O.H. Davis, 14 November 1870, in Press Copies of Letters Sent by the Bureau of Equipment and Recruiting to the Commandant of the Norfolk Navy Yard, volume 3 (Washington, D.C.: Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel, Record Group 24, National Archives and Records Service), p. 297.

⁸⁹ Frederick S. Harrod, *Manning the New Navy: The Development of a Modern Naval Enlisted Force, 1899-1940*. (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1978), p. 10.

In addition, the Navy permitted African Americans to enlist as naval apprentices. In the years 1880 and 1890, about 3% and 14%, respectively, of African American sailors were naval apprentices. Citing the “great want of intelligent native-born seamen,” in 1875, the Navy had begun enlisting young men from 16 to 18 years of age to serve as apprentices until age 21. These boys were to “receive an elementary English education” and be “initiated in all duties of sailors on a man-of-war.”⁹⁰ The Navy hoped that by training its own seamen it could create an American-born enlisted force composed of men who would make the naval service a career. Because the Navy selected apprentices with the clear intention that these young men would form the core of its future enlisted force, the choice of some African American apprentices shows that the Navy was willing to have at least a small number of African Americans for entire careers in the service.

Yet, although it seemed that African Americans were able to enter the Navy in relatively large numbers, their status remained lower than that of their white colleagues. Over three-quarters signed on as landsmen, twice the proportion of whites.⁹¹ Only a few of them became petty officers. Just as before the Civil War, the majority of African American personnel continued to serve as landsmen, cooks, and stewards.

The presence of large numbers of African Americans in the late nineteenth century navy did not mean that race was not a factor in personnel decisions. In December 1874, for example, an officer at the Norfolk navy yard reported: “Regarding the probability of enlisting the requisite

⁹⁰ U.S. Navy Department, *Annual Report of the Secretary of the Navy, 1875* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1875), p. 18.

⁹¹ Frederick S. Harrod, “Jim Crow in the Navy (1798-1941),” *United States Naval Institute Proceedings*, September 1979, p. 48.

number of men to fill up the crew of the *Brooklyn*, I would state that there are no men offering here for enlistment except a few colored men.” He added that efforts were being made “to ascertain from the *Brooklyn* if colored men were desired.”⁹²

Other evidence indicates a worsening of conditions for African American sailors after the Civil War. The character of the African Americans entering the Navy seems to have changed. Enlistment returns reveal that the proportion of African Americans who listed mariner as their previous occupation decreased from 13.1 % in 1870 to 5.9 % in 1890. The percentage of African Americans who had been cooks and waiters increased from 28.9 % to 49.3 % in that same period.⁹³

The birthplace of African American enlistees also indicates the shifting character of African American sailors. From 1870 to 1890, the number of African American recruits from the northeast declined, and the proportion of men from the upper South, especially Maryland and Virginia, grew. The preponderance of men from these two states reflects the convergence of naval installations and African American populations. Few African American men from Maryland and Virginia had sea experience.⁹⁴

Although the U.S. Navy was accepting African American recruits for general duty, it had no African American officers. Between 1872 and 1900, six African Americans were appointed to the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis. Three of them were admitted, while three did

⁹² Captain S.P. Quakenbush, commanding officer of the receiving ship *New Hampshire*, to Commodore T. H. Stevens, commandant of the Norfolk Navy Yard, 5 December 1874, in Letters Received by the Bureau of Equipment and Recruiting from Norfolk, Volume 2, Record Group 24, National Archives.

⁹³ Harrod, *Manning the New Navy*, p. 11.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

not attend at all. Of the three African American midshipmen who actually entered Annapolis, none graduated.

In the thirty-three years of peace that followed the American Civil War, segregation and discrimination in the country as a whole replaced the slavery of the Antebellum South. Informal patterns of segregation in railroads and other public accommodations were being incorporated into “Jim Crow” legislation in the South, but racism was burgeoning in every aspect of American society. Racial segregation became the law of the land through the Supreme Court’s decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), which established the “separate but equal” doctrine. At the beginning of the twentieth century, southern states also enacted laws to disenfranchise African Americans. In addition, discrimination in employment became the rule rather than the exception throughout the country.

The U.S. Navy too mirrored this growing trend of segregation and institutionalized discrimination. This meant the removal of African Americans from many common ratings and their confinement to menial jobs. The Navy had become a segregated service because African American sailors were likely to live and work in restricted enclaves on board ship rather than being spread throughout ship’s crews.

The United States did not assume the role of a world power until the 1890s, but well before then, American commercial interests abroad were expanding. Taking advantage of Great Britain’s use of force in the Opium Wars with China in the mid-nineteenth century, the United States quickly demanded equal commercial rights with the “Middle Kingdom.” In 1853, Matthew Perry “opened” Japan to the commercial interests of the United States and Europe. In 1867, Secretary of State William Seward purchased Alaska from Russia, and his immediate

successors at the State Department tried to extend American power into the Caribbean and Pacific.⁹⁵

Because of these growing international interests, many in the United States called for a strengthening of the Navy. Congress recognized the need for a new, modern navy to replace the aging wooden sailing vessels of the Civil War, so, beginning in 1883 and continuing into the 1890s, it authorized the construction of thirty-five warships, including two powerful armored cruisers.⁹⁶

During the Spanish American War, two thousand African American enlisted men and petty officers served as gunners, gunners' mates, and messmen on the ships that defeated the Spanish Navy at Manila and Santiago.⁹⁷ The Navy continued its policy of limiting African Americans to the enlisted ranks. By contrast, the Army commissioned some African Americans directly from civilian life and from the regular regiments to staff the volunteer units raised for the war.

One of the legendary characters of the United States Navy of the period from the Spanish American War to World War II was John Henry "Dick" Turpin, an African American enlisted man known to most of the old Navy "brass" with whom he served on numerous ships of the fleet. Turpin participated in almost every naval engagement from the Spanish American War to World War II. Turpin entered the Navy about 1883 as an "apprentice boy," survived the explosion of the USS *Maine*, and served continuously until 1925, when he was placed in the

⁹⁵ Farr, *Black Odyssey*, p. 144.

⁹⁶ Samuel W. Bryant, *The Sea and the States* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1947), pp. 351-352.

⁹⁷ William R. Mueller, "The Negro in the Navy," *Social Forces*, Volume 24, Issue 1 (October 1945), p. 111.

Fleet Reserve. He made a name for himself as an outstanding gunner's mate, boatswain, and diver. Turpin left the naval service in 1925 with the permanent rate of Chief Gunner's Mate. He returned to limited active duty in 1938 and helped to boost morale during World War II by visiting naval installations. He served as a source of inspiration for new recruits.⁹⁸

African American sailors took part in all the important naval engagements of the Spanish American War and suffered at the same rate as white sailors. Because most of the two thousand African Americans in the Navy served as cooks, stewards, gunner's mates, machinists, firemen, and coal-passers, they had few opportunities for feats of heroism. Among those who did receive recognition was Elijah B. Tunnell, a cook aboard the USS *Winslow*. He was one of the first casualties after the declaration of war and became known as a "second [Crispus] Attucks." John Jordan, a gunner's mate on Admiral George Dewey's flagship, fired the first shot in the battle of Manila Bay.⁹⁹ Two African American sailors were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor during the Spanish American War. On February 11, 1898, while serving aboard the USS *Cushing*, Ship's Cook 1st Class Daniel Atkins of Brunswick, Virginia, attempted but failed to save the life of a comrade who had fallen overboard. Fireman 1st Class Robert Penn of City Point, Virginia, risked life and limb to shut down a leaking boiler on the battleship *Iowa* while it was patrolling off the coast of Cuba.¹⁰⁰

In 1899, as the Navy Department faced the prospect of manning its new steel Navy, including a growing force of battleships, recruiting practices changed. The Navy Department

⁹⁸ Dennis D. Nelson, *The Integration of the Negro into the Navy, 1776-1947* (New York, 1951), pp. 6-7.

⁹⁹ William B. Gatewood, Jr., *Black Americans and the White Man's Burden 1898-1903* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), p. 61.

¹⁰⁰ Irvin H. Lee, *Negro Medal of Honor Men* (New York: Dood and Mead, 1967), pp. 53-55.

started enlisting “landsmen for training.” In this program, the Navy would take civilians without a maritime background and train them for naval duty. Now men across the entire country became eligible for the Navy. With such a determined effort to expand the recruiting pool, the Navy no longer had to rely on immigrant or African American sailors to man the fleet. ¹⁰¹

The restrictive policies of the Navy gradually sifted out those African Americans who sought significant responsibility, and the Navy only signed on those who would serve as firemen or in the messman branch. By 1906, African American representation dropped to fewer than 1,500 men in a total force of nearly 30,000, or less than 5%. ¹⁰²

In 1902, by force of arms and Congressional sanction, the Philippine Islands became a territory of the United States. Whatever the reputed commercial or strategic advantages, the acquisition of the Philippine Islands also provided the Navy with a large supply of potential servants for its wardrooms. Soon, Asians dominated the messman ratings in the U.S. Navy. By 1914, Filipinos outnumbered African Americans in the naval service.

The history of African Americans serving in the U.S. Navy in World War I has never been expansively explored by scholars. But, Wilber B. Miller, a former Mess Attendant 3rd Class who served during the war aboard the USS *Nokomis*, a yacht converted to a gunboat, can help us fill in some of the gaps. According to Miller, who was seventeen at the time he enlisted:

There were not many of us... And to the officers for whom we worked, and who later became the historians, we mess attendants were non-entities. Aboard the yacht gunboat *Nokomis* there were six or seven blacks - out of almost 100 officers and men – one wardroom cook and the rest mess attendants. My job as mess attendant was to look

¹⁰¹ Harrod, “Jim Crow in the Navy (1798-1941),” p. 49.

¹⁰² Harrod, *Manning the New Navy*, p. 183.

after three officers. I cleaned their clothes, shined their shoes and kept their quarters in order. At mealtime I'd either be waiting on tables or helping the cook. ¹⁰³

Most American institutions were segregated by race in 1917-1918, and the U.S. Navy was no exception. During World War I, rules became more rigid for African Americans serving in the U.S. Navy. Non-whites had few opportunities for advancement and almost never held authority over whites. All the African Americans on Miller's ship belonged to the messman's division. Miller never encountered any of the paltry handfuls of African American petty officers from the pre-World War I Navy, like Chief Gunner's Mate Turpin, who had been permitted to continue their service in general ratings. But Miller did encounter some black sailors:

I did see blacks in the Portuguese and British navies. They were rated seamen who appeared to be integrated into those forces. Of course, 'integration' wasn't even a word, then. I was a poor country boy trying to get out of the bad situation I'd grown up in – we were all just taking what we could get. ¹⁰⁴

The preacher's son from Texas went through boot camp at Pelham Bay, New York, and spent the next two years aboard ship:

At the naval training station the races lived together, and much of the time we trained together. There were only four to six blacks in the training company. During the day, when the white seaman recruits went off to learn their lessons under the boatswain's mates, we'd have our own separate lessons. We were taught how to polish silver and furniture, how to select cuts of meat and serve food – the things that we were supposed to know.

It was a segregated experience, but there was always overlapping. In our off-time we'd all play together in athletics and share in whatever entertainment there was. ¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ HMC Richard E. Miller, "A yachtsman's tale," *All Hands*, volume 851, February 1988: p. 28.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

At the end of his training in August 1917, he gained his “sea legs” aboard a Navy oiler before reporting to the *Nokomis*, a luxury steam cruiser. Messman Miller developed strong opinions about the officers of the *Nokomis*:

They treated me all right, but many of them were excited with their position. They’d never had servants before and now they had servants – some let it go to their heads. What they thought of us black messmen was nothing! ¹⁰⁶

During most of the nineteenth century African Americans served in an integrated U.S. Navy, and in the latter half of the century they averaged between 20% and 30% of the enlisted strength. ¹⁰⁷ But the employment of African Americans in the Navy was abruptly curtailed after the turn of the century. Mirroring the rise of Jim Crow and legalized segregation in much of the United States was the cutback in the number of African American sailors, who by 1909 were mostly in the galleys and the engine rooms of the fleet.

As the United States moved into World War I, the U.S. Navy became increasingly restrictive in its use of African American sailors. African Americans still worked in food-service jobs and cared for officers, but the engineering-type petty officers were more relics of a bygone period because those who retired or otherwise left the service were not replaced. It was essentially a segregated service, because African American sailors were likely to live and work in restricted enclaves on board ship rather than being spread throughout ship’s crews.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, p. 30.

¹⁰⁷ Estimates vary. Exact racial statistics concerning the U.S. Navy in the nineteenth century are hard to locate. See Enlistment of Men of Colored Race, 23 January 1942, a note appended to Hearings Before the General Board of the Navy, 1942, Operational Archives, Department of the Navy.

After World War I, the U.S. Navy came to prefer having servants from other races besides African Americans and so took in Chinese and Filipinos as cooks and stewards. On August 4, 1919, the Navy Department stopped enlisting African Americans altogether. As African Americans retired from the U.S. Navy, their numbers in the naval service dwindled to almost nothing. The nadir was reached in 1932, when attrition had finally reduced the number of African Americans in the U.S. Navy to 441, just 0.55% of the total enlisted strength of 81,120.¹⁰⁸

Those African Americans who remained continued in their traditional roles as laborers and servants. As these men retired, their slots were usually filled by white laborers and by Filipinos. The U.S. Navy came to believe that Filipinos made better servants and messmen than African Americans, and it became standard Navy practice to recruit Filipinos for these roles. By 1932, Filipinos in the Navy had ten times the representation of African Americans.¹⁰⁹

In January 1933, the U.S. Navy again began enlisting African Americans, this time with the rationale that a war in the Pacific might eliminate the opportunity to enlist servants from East Asia. Most American naval officers, however, agreed to enlist African Americans but urged careful selectivity in enlistment. They felt that African Americans from northern urban areas were undesirable because, as one officer wrote, African Americans were "...apt to be independent, insolent, and over-educated" and therefore unsuitable to play the "lackey" sought by the service.¹¹⁰ On the other hand, by "training and environment the Southern colored man has inherited a servant's point of view and is usually contented and happy in that position." Thus

¹⁰⁸ Harrod, *Manning the New Navy*, p. 183.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ H.S. Gearing, Memorandum for Captain Claude, December 2, 1932, No. NC66(1), General Correspondence, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel, Record Group 24, National Archives.

the majority of American naval officers favored recruiting in the South to obtain the “unspoiled young negro.”¹¹¹

The Navy continued to enlist African Americans as messmen because they believed that if African Americans advanced to petty-officer status, they would not be able to exert effective leadership over white sailors under them. Even if African Americans reached the rank of chief steward, they had no authority over lower-rated enlisted men in the general service.

In June 1940, when Adolf Hitler’s Germany overran France, only 4,007 African Americans were serving in the Navy, most as messmen, though at least one chief petty officer remained on duty. Although the United States had begun to rearm by 1940, the Navy continued to recruit African Americans for an expanding Messman Branch, later redesignated as the Steward Branch. For example, the U.S. Navy issued a call for 4,700 volunteers in July of that year, but only two hundred of them could be African Americans.¹¹²

In 1940, President Roosevelt decided to run for an unprecedented third term as the United States rearmed to meet the growing threat of the Axis Powers of Germany, Italy, and Japan. Civil rights activist A. Philip Randolph, and other African American leaders believed that the national emergency and the presidential election afforded them an opportunity to combat racial inequality in the United States. If African Americans, who formed a large part of the northern

¹¹¹ D.A. Weaver to Captain Abram Claude, November 28, 1932, No. NC66(1), General Correspondence, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel, Record Group 24, National Archives. See also under the same file number A. W. Johnson, Memorandum for Chief of the Bureau of Navigation, November 8, 1932, and W. T. Cluverius to Captain Abram Claude, November 25, 1932. According to the historical record, African Americans took advantage of this opportunity, their numbers rose from 441 in 1932 to 4,007 in June 1940, when they constituted 2.3% of the Navy’s 170,000 total. See Memorandum, H.A. Badt, Bureau of Navigation, for Officer in Charge, Public Relations, July 24, 1940, subject: Negroes in the U.S. Navy, Nav-641, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel.

¹¹² Memorandum, Captain H.A. Badt, USN for the Officer in Charge, Public Relations, 24 July 1940, subject: Negroes in the U.S. Navy, Military Archives Division, National Archives, Washington, DC.

electorate, supported President Roosevelt and his program of national defense, a grateful Roosevelt administration might improve conditions for African Americans. Opportunities might also open up for African Americans in the armed forces and the growing defense industries. To dramatize African American voting power, Randolph planned a march on Washington, D.C.

The mere threat of a march, which never took place, produced positive results. President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802, which established the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) to persuade defense industries to make more jobs available to African Americans, though it could not compel them to do so. The President also appointed a few African Americans to important and highly visible posts. Colonel Benjamin O. Davis became the first African American general, and William H. Hastie, dean of the Howard University Law School, became the War Department's principal adviser on racial matters. The Roosevelt administration assigned an African American reserve officer, Colonel Campbell C. Johnson, to help administer the Selective Service System, which was required by law to operate without regard to race. The War Department also promised broader opportunities, including pilot training in the Army Air Corps, for African American servicemen. The U.S. Navy, however, held firm to its policy of segregation and restricted African American service.

During the period before the United States entered World War II, African American sailors were still relegated to the messman branch, a division of menial labor not calculated to inspire a man to distinguished service while under fire. However, U.S. Navy ships required that every man aboard be trained and utilized at specific posts or battle stations in emergencies. Thus, African American mess attendants and stewards were trained in shipboard drills at many jobs remote from their ratings, and in battle they functioned as gunners, torpedomen, fire-control men, and ammunition handlers.

Therefore, among the nation's heroes of World War II and the recipients of the Navy's highest awards for gallantry were a number of men from the steward's branch. In fact, these were the only African Americans so honored in World War II. One of these stewards, Doris "Dorie" Miller, became a hero on the first day of the Pacific war when he manned a machine gun on the burning deck of the USS *West Virginia* in the midst of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and destroyed a number of enemy planes.¹¹³ On November 12, 1942, Leonard Harmon lost his life while serving aboard the cruiser *San Francisco* in battle off Guadalcanal. He was awarded the Navy Cross posthumously.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Dennis D. Nelson, *The Integration of the Negro Into the U.S. Navy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1951), pp. 25-26.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

Chapter 4 - “The Road to Integration”: The African American Experience in the U.S. Navy, 1941-1955

This chapter describes the African American experience in the U.S. Navy from the beginning of World War II to 1955. The unprecedented demands of World War II created pressure for a more rational use of human resources that helped erode racial segregation in the Navy. Secretary of the Navy James V. Forrestal concluded that the training and assignments available to African Americans had to reflect their abilities and the needs of the wartime Navy, instead of being determined almost exclusively by race. By the time World War II had ended, the Navy had commissioned its first African American officers, experimented with a few ships manned solely by African Americans, and begun integrating the races in the crews of fleet auxiliaries like oilers and ammunition ships.

By the end of World War I, and during the two decades that followed, few African Americans served in the U.S. Navy. Those who still served in the naval service tended to be mess attendants, though a few long-service petty officers, who had earned their rank years earlier with gun crews or engine rooms, were serving out their final years before retiring. In June 1940, when German troops overran France, only 4,007 African Americans were serving in the U.S. Navy, most of them as messmen, though at least one chief petty officer remained on duty.¹¹⁵

Although the United States had begun to rearm by 1940, the Navy still had no interest in recruiting African Americans for an expanding Messman Branch, later redesignated as the

¹¹⁵ Memorandum, Captain H. A. Badt, USN for the Officer in Charge, Public Relations, 24 July 1940, Subject: Negroes in the U.S. Navy, Military Archives Division, National Archives, Washington DC.

Steward Branch. For example, the Navy issued a call for 4,700 volunteers in July of that year, but only 200 of them could be African American.¹¹⁶

Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox ignored the efforts of people outside the Navy who tried to persuade the service to recruit additional African Americans and use them for naval, rather than housekeeping duties. Knox insisted that his actions were done for the benefit of African Americans, sparing them the embarrassment of having to compete against whites on equal terms. Knox was convinced that "...it is no kindness to negroes to thrust them upon men of the white race," and he suggested that African Americans might make their major contribution to the armed forces in the Army's African American units.¹¹⁷

The Navy's General Board, which functioned like an advisory staff, suggested that Knox respond to the criticisms of the Navy's racial policy in the following manner: "colored men are now enlisted in the messman branch...and given every opportunity for advancement to cooks and stewards." These grades enabled them to earn the same pay as petty officers though they could not exercise authority outside their branch. "Experience of many years in the Navy," the General Board observed, "...has shown clearly that men of the colored race, if enlisted in any other branch than the messman's branch, and promoted to the position of petty officer, cannot maintain discipline among men of the white race over whom they may be placed by reason of their rating."¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Jack D. Foner, *Blacks and the Military in American History*, (New York: Praeger Publishers, Inc., 1974), p. 135.

¹¹⁷ Letter, Secretary of the Navy to Senator Arthur Capper (Kansas), 1 August 1940, QN/P14-4, General Records of the Navy, (hereafter "GenRecsNav").

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

The threat of an African American march on Washington and the implied promise of the African American community's support for President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his policies seemed to have a positive effect upon the president. Several prominent African American leaders were appointed to positions of authority in the federal government. The War Department also promised more opportunities for African Americans, including pilot training in the Army Air Corps. The Navy, however, stood firm and clung to its existing policy of segregation and continued to limit African American service.

Not even the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor could persuade the Navy to change its racial policy. Even after Germany and Italy joined forces with Japan, Secretary Knox and the Navy's General Board stood firm. According to the General Board, racism was too deeply embedded in general American society to permit integration in the Navy, as white men "will not accept the negro in a position of authority over him."¹¹⁹

On December 9, 1941, the NAACP contacted Secretary Knox and asked whether, in view of the intensive recruiting campaign then under way, if the Navy would accept African Americans into a branch besides the messman's branch. The Bureau of Navigation replied that there had been no change in policy and that none would be contemplated. The NAACP wrote the president in protest of this decision, and he in turn asked the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) to consider the case. Committee chairman Mark Ethridge conferred with Assistant Secretary of the Navy Bard, pointing out that African Americans were eligible for general duty in World War I but that the Navy now had regressed by restricting them to the Messman's Branch. The committee was even willing to pay the price of segregation to insure

¹¹⁹ Eric Purdon, *Black Company: The Story of Subchaser 1264*, (Washington: Robert B. Luce, Inc., 1972), p. 18.

that African Americans would be able to return to general duty. Etheridge recommended that the Navy amend its policy and accept African Americans for use at Caribbean stations or on harbor craft.¹²⁰ Criticism of Navy policy up to this point had emanated mostly from civil rights organizations and a few select congressmen, but now, it expanded to include another government agency: the FEPC. As President Roosevelt no doubt expected, the Fair Employment Practices Committee had come out in support of his compromise solution for the U.S. Navy.

The FEPC had no jurisdiction over the armed forces, and Knox continued to assert that he could not risk “crews that are impaired in efficiency because of racial prejudice” during wartime. Knox declared that a segregated general service was impossible, since enough men with the skills necessary to operate a war vessel were unavailable even “if you had the entire Negro population of the United States to choose from.” As for limiting African Americans to the steward branch, he explained that this policy prevented African Americans from rising to command whites, something that seemed to “...instantly provoke serious trouble.”¹²¹ Faced in wartime with these arguments for efficiency, Assistant Secretary Bard could only promise Etheridge and the FEPC that the issue of African American enlistment would eventually be taken under consideration. Mark Etheridge suggested that the President might wish to consider this matter further.

On January 15, 1942, the President asked Knox to consider the whole matter once again and thought that the Bureau of Navigation might invent something that African American

¹²⁰ U.S. Navy, Bureau of Naval Personnel, “The Negro in the Navy in World War II” (1947), pp. 4-5, (hereafter “BuPers Hist”); Letter, Mark Etheridge to Lee Nichols, 14 Jul 53, in Nicholls Collection, Center of Military History.

¹²¹ Letter, Secretary of the Navy to Gifford Pinchot, 19 January 1942, 54-1-15, “GenRecsNav.”

enlistees could do in addition to being messmen. The next day, Knox asked the General Board to develop a plan for recruiting 5,000 African Americans for billets other than the messman branch.¹²²

The General Board met on January 23rd to consider Knox's request, and it became clear that the minority report of the role of African Americans in the Navy had gained at least one convert among the senior officers: the Inspector General of the Navy, Rear Admiral Charles P. Snyder. Admiral Snyder suggested that the General Board employ African Americans in the Musician's Branch because "the colored race is very musical and they are versed in all forms of rhythm," in the Aviation Branch where the Army had reported some success in employing African Americans, and on auxiliaries and minor vessels, especially transports. Snyder noted that these suggestions would involve the creation of segregated training schools and that the whole program would be "troublesome and require tact, patience, and tolerance" on the part of those in charge. He also added, "we have so many difficulties to surmount anyhow that one more possibly wouldn't swell the total very much." Predicting that segregation would become the focal point of African American protest, Snyder argued that the Navy should begin accepting African Americans in the segregated general service.¹²³

The Bureau of Navigation ignored Admiral Snyder's suggestions. A spokesman for the Bureau warned that the 5,000 African Americans under consideration were just an opening wedge. "The sponsors of the program," Captain Kenneth Whiting contended, "desire full equality on the part of the Negro and will not rest content until they obtain it." In the end, he

¹²² "BuPers Hist," p. 5.

¹²³ MacGregor, "Integration of the Armed Forces," p. 63.

predicted, African Americans would be on every navy ship in direct proportion to their percentage of the population.¹²⁴

The Commandant of the Marine Corps, Maj. General Thomas Holcomb, echoed the bureau's sentiments, saying that the issue of enlisting African Americans was crucial:

If we are defeated we must not close our eyes to the fact that once in they [African Americans] will be strengthened in their effort to force themselves into every activity we have. If they are not satisfied to be messmen, they will not be satisfied to go into the construction or labor battalions. Don't forget the colleges are turning out a large number of well-educated African Americans. I don't know how long we will be able to keep them out of the V-7 class. I think not very long.¹²⁵

Holcomb also called the enlistment of African Americans "absolutely tragic"; African Americans had every opportunity, he added, "to satisfy their aspiration to serve in the Army," and their desire to enter the naval service was largely an effort "to break into a club that doesn't want them."¹²⁶

The General Board heard similar sentiments from representatives of the Bureau of Aeronautics, the Bureau of Yards and Docks, and, with reservations, from the Coast Guard. Confronted with such opposition, the General Board capitulated and on February 3rd made its report to Knox. Analyzing the complements of various types of ships, the General Board noted that there were few non-rated billets on patrol vessels, and that there were then no African American officers and few African American petty officers to fill other posts. Mingling African Americans with whites in the relatively large number of non-rated billets on larger ships could

¹²⁴ Ibid, p. 64.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

result in racial tensions and lower ship efficiency.¹²⁷ The General Board reported to Knox that it was unable to submit a plan and strongly recommended that the current policy be allowed to stand. The General Board stated that “if, in the opinion of higher authority, political pressure is such as to require the enlistment of these people for general service, let it be for that.” The General Board also stated that if restricting African Americans to the messman branch was discrimination, the General Board added, “It is but part and parcel of similar discrimination throughout the United States, not only against the African American, but in the Pacific States and in Hawaii against citizens of Asiatic descent.”¹²⁸

President Roosevelt refused to accept the argument that the only choice lay between exclusion in the Messman’s Branch and total integration in the general service. His desire to avoid the racial issue was understandable. With the recent defeats at Pearl Harbor, Wake Island, and the Philippines, the war was not going well for the United States, and the president was convinced that any changes in racial policy must not come at the expense of decreased naval effectiveness. Nevertheless, he believed that there were some jobs other than messmen to which African Americans could be assigned. He asked that the recommendations of the General Board be returned to them for further consideration.

The Navy heeded the President’s wishes, for on February 18, 1942, the General Board asked that the bureaus and other agencies provide lists of stations or assignments where African Americans could be used in other than the Messman’s Branch, “and added that it was “unwise and inadvisable to repeat or further emphasize the undesirability of the recruitment of men of the

¹²⁷ “BuPers Hist,” p. 5.

¹²⁸ Ibid, p. 6.

colored race.”¹²⁹ The Board decided that its proposals had to provide for segregation in order to prevent the injection of the race issue into the Navy. It rejected the idea of enlisting African Americans as musicians and carpenter’s mates or designating a branch just for African Americans. Basing its decision on the plans quickly submitted by the bureaus, the General Board recommended a course that it felt offered “least disadvantageous and the least difficulty of accomplishment as a war measure”: the formation of African American units in the shore establishment, African American crews for naval district local defense craft and selected Coast Guard cutters, African American regiments in the Seabees, and composite battalions in the Marine Corps. The board asked that the Navy be granted wide latitude in deciding the number of African Americans to be accepted as well as their rate of enlistment and the method of recruiting, training, and assignment.¹³⁰ The President agreed to the plan, but balked at the board’s last request. He told Secretary Knox that this was a matter that should be handled by the two of them only.

On April 7, 1942 Secretary Knox announced that beginning on June 1, 1942, African Americans might enlist in the general service as well as in the messman branch. African American volunteers would be enlisted for “general service” in the Naval Reserve, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard, and recruiting would not begin until a separate training station could be

¹²⁹ Ibid, p. 7.

¹³⁰ Memos, Chairman, Gen Board, for Chief, BUNAV, Commandant, CG, and Commandant, MC, 18 Feb 42, sub: Enlistment of Men of Colored Race in Other Than Messman Branch. For examples of responses, see Letter, Commandant, to Chairman, Gen Board, 24 Feb 42, same sub; Memo, Chief, BuNav, for Chairman, Gen Board, 7 Mar 42, same sub; Memo, CNO for Chief, BuNav, 25 Feb 42, same sub, with 1st Indy by CINCUSFLT, 28 Feb 42, same sub. The final enlistment plan is found in Memo, Chairman, Gen Board, for SecNav, 20 Mar 42, same sub (G.B. No. 421). All in Records of Gen Board, Operational Archives, Department of the Navy, (hereafter “OpNavArchives”). It was transmitted to the President in Letter, SecNav to President, 27 Mar 42, p14-4/MM, General Records of the Department of the Navy, “GenRecsNav.”

established. Knox also stated that African Americans were not to go to sea on combat vessels, but that the new volunteers were to be stationed at shore establishments, at navy yards, with construction crews, and with battalions at advanced bases. The African American units were to be trained by white petty officers until African American petty officers could be trained to become eligible for such command. Another provision was that the enlistments would end six months after the end of the war, as was the case with all reserves in the Navy.¹³¹ The U.S. Navy would accept 277 African American volunteers (no draft was yet contemplated) per week for enlistment in all ratings of the general service of the reserve components of the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard. Their actual entry would have to await the construction of “suitable,” meaning segregated, facilities, but the U.S. Navy’s goal for the first year was 14,000 African Americans in the general service.¹³²

The Navy began to set a course for the employment of its African American volunteers. On April 21, 1942, Secretary Knox approved a plan for training African Americans at Camp Barry, an isolated portion of the Great Lakes Training Center in Illinois. Knox also approved the use of facilities at Hampton Institute, the well-known African American school in Virginia, as an advanced training school for African American recruits.¹³³

African American enlistment began in earnest on June 1, 1942, and volunteers started entering Great Lakes later that month in classes of 277 men. At the same time, the Navy opened enlistments for an unlimited number of African American Naval Construction Battalions

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² “BuPers Hist,” p. 8.

¹³³ Memorandum, Chief, Bureau of Navigation, for Secretary of the Navy, April 17, 1942, subject: Training facilities for Negro Recruits, Nav-102; Memorandum, Secretary of the Navy for Rear Admiral Randall Jacobs, April 21, 1942, 54-1-22. Both in General Records of the Navy.

(Seabees) and messmen. In August, the African American training school was renamed “Camp Robert Smalls” in memory of the African American naval hero of the Civil War.

During the first six months of the new segregated training program, before the great influx of African Americans who were drafted, the Navy set the training period at twelve weeks. Later, when the Navy had reluctantly abandoned the longer period, it had discovered that the regular eight-week course was sufficient. Approximately 31% of those graduating from the recruit course were qualified for Class A schools and entered advanced classes to receive training that would normally lead to petty officer rating for the top graduates and prepare men for assignment to naval stations and local defense and district craft. There they would serve in such class “A” specialties as radioman, signalman, yeoman, and other occupational specialties such as machinist, mechanic, carpenter, electrician, cook, and baker.¹³⁴ Some of these classes were held at Hampton Institute, but as the number of African American recruits increased, the majority remained at Camp Smalls for advanced training. The rest of the recruit graduates, those unqualified for advanced schooling, either went directly to naval stations and local defense and district craft where they relieved whites as seaman, second class, and fireman, third class, and as trainees in specialties that required no advanced schooling; or to naval ammunition depots as unskilled laborers. The latter equaled about eighty men per week.¹³⁵

The Navy continued to assimilate African American volunteers, suffering few of the personnel problems that plagued the Army in the first months of the war. In contrast to the Army’s situation, caused by the thousands of African American recruits streaming in from

¹³⁴ “BuPers Hist,” pp. 28-30, 60-61.

¹³⁵ BuPers, “Reports, Schedules, and Charts Relating to Enlistment, Training, and Assignment of Negro Personnel,” June 5, 1942, Pers-617, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel, hereafter “BuPersRecs.”

Selective Service, the Navy's plans for its volunteers were disrupted only because qualified African Americans showed little desire to join the Navy, and more than half of those who did want to join were rejected. The newly named Bureau of Naval Personnel, formerly known as the Bureau of Navigation, reported that during the first three weeks of recruitment only 1,261 African Americans volunteered for the general service, and 58% of these had to be rejected for physical and other reasons. The Chief of Naval Personnel, Rear Admiral Randall Jacobs, was surprised at the small number of volunteers, a figure far below the planners' expectations, and his surprise turned to concern in the next months as the seventeen-year-old volunteers, the primary target of armed forces recruiters, continued to choose the Army over the Navy at a ratio of ten to one.¹³⁶

Naval personnel officials agreed that they had to attract a number of intelligent and able African Americans, but they could not understand the African American reluctance to enlist. Admiral Jacobs blamed it on a lack of publicity while historians of the Bureau of Naval Personnel concluded that it was due in part to African American unfamiliarity with the sea and to their fear of water.¹³⁷

The fact was that African Americans were hesitant to enlist in the Navy because it was and remained to be an all-white service. Only when the Navy began to assign African American recruiters to the numerous naval districts, and began to use African American chief petty officer reservists from World War I at recruiting centers to explain the new opportunities for African Americans in the Navy, did the Bureau of Naval Personnel overcome African American

¹³⁶ Memorandum, Chief, Naval Personnel, for Commander, Great Lakes NTC, April 23, 1943, P14-1, BuPers Recs.

¹³⁷ "BuPers Hist," p. 54.

reluctance. By February 1, 1943, there were 26,909 African Americans in the U.S. Navy (still only 2% of the total enlisted); 6,662 were in the General Service 2,020 were in the Seabees and over two-thirds of these were messmen (19,227).¹³⁸

The smooth and efficient distribution of African American recruits was short-lived however. Under pressure from the Army, the War Manpower Commission, and the White House, the Navy was forced to expand significantly its African American recruit program. The Army had long objected to the Navy's recruitment method, and as early as February 1942, Secretary of War Henry Stimson was calling the volunteer recruitment system a huge waste of manpower.¹³⁹ He was even more direct when he complained to the president that through voluntary recruiting, the Navy had avoided acceptance of any considerable number of African Americans. The Army was now faced with the possibility of having to accept an even greater proportion of African Americans "with adverse effect on its combat efficiency." The solution, as Stimson saw it, was for the Navy to take its recruits from Selective Service. But Stimson failed to convince others. The President accepted the Navy's argument that segregation would be difficult to maintain aboard ships and wrote to Stimson:

If the Navy living conditions on board ship were similar to the Army living conditions on land, the problem would be easier but the circumstances...being such as they are, I feel that it is best to continue the present system at this time.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ Ibid. p. 9.

¹³⁹ Memorandum, Secretary of War for the Secretary of the Navy, February 16, 1942, subject: Continuing of Voluntary Recruiting by the Navy, QN/P14-4, GenRecsNav.

¹⁴⁰ Memorandum, President for the Secretary of War, March 20, 1942, copy in QN/P14-4, GenRecsNav.

At the end of 1942 and in the early months of 1943, the Navy again came under fire from the Army, the War Manpower Commission and the president, resulting in a great expansion of the African American program. On June 30, 1942, there were 5,026 African Americans in the regular Navy; most of them mess attendants. This figure was about 2% of the total enlisted male personnel of the Navy and about 2.5% of the male regulars.¹⁴¹

The numbers of African Americans climbed rapidly. By December 31, 1943, there were 101,573 African Americans on active duty in various rates; 37,981 were Steward's Mates (36%). June 30, 1944, saw a total of 142,306, of whom 48,524 were Steward's Mates (about 33%). The figure for December 31, 1944, indicated a leveling off, with a total of 153,199, including 52,994 steward's mates (about 34%). As the war was drawing to an end, on June 30, 1945, the Navy counted 165,500 active duty African American enlisted personnel; 75,500 of these were steward's mates (about 45%). As of June 30, 1945, about 123,000 African American personnel had served or were serving abroad.¹⁴² The Joint Chiefs of Staff in the fall of 1942 requested that a study be made of personnel needs of the armed services for 1944 and beyond and also directed that the Chairman of the War Manpower Commission be consulted to establish a proper balance between manpower resources and requirements.

On October 19, 1942, the Chief of Naval Personnel, noting that these studies were under way, wrote to the commandants of the Coast Guard and Marine Corps requesting their views regarding the maximum number of African Americans who might be employed in their respective services. The Coast Guard replied that it could use 2,000 African American men in

¹⁴¹ "BuPers Hist," p. 9.

¹⁴² Memorandum, President for the Secretary of War, March 20, 1942, copy in QN/P14-4, GenRecsNav.

the Messman Branch, 390 on ships in branches other than the Messman's and 1,610 in miscellaneous general duty. The Marine Corps replied that it had planned to use 1,041 in "composite battalions" in 1943 and 1944. The Commandant of the Marine Corps believed that if the Corps had to accept African Americans, a small number could be used as Messmen at larger Corps posts within the United States and in labor battalions. The primary duties of the latter would be to unload vessels in the theaters of operations. The Commandant expressed the opinion that if the Corps was required to take on more African Americans than planned, increases in the Corps's size would be needed, since previous estimates of its total personnel needs had been made on the assumption that all men therein would be of the type now being enlisted.¹⁴³

On December 5, 1942, much broader considerations and conflicts over manpower policy than those involved in the African American program led President Roosevelt to direct the discontinuance in all services of volunteer enlistment of men between the ages of eighteen and thirty-eight.¹⁴⁴ Beginning in February 1943, all men in this age group would be obtained through Selective Service. The order also placed Selective Service under the War Manpower Commission.

The Navy issued its first call for inductees from Selective Service in February of 1943, adopting the same policy as the Army: requesting men by race and specifying the number of whites and African Americans needed for the Navy, Marines, and Coast Guard. The Bureau of

¹⁴³ "BuPers Hist,"p. 10.

¹⁴⁴ Executive Order 9279, December 5, 1942.

Naval Personnel planned to continue its old monthly quota of about 1,200 African Americans for general service and 1,500 for the Messman's Branch. ¹⁴⁵

Because the Navy was ordered to rely almost exclusively on the Selective Service System for its manpower, the Navy was concerned with orderly training, so it limited the employment of African American sailors planned by its General Board. Secretary Knox wrote:

I took up with the president today the matter of Negro selectees for the navy and explained to him that it was impossible for us to take any Negroes in excess of those set up in our quota for each month because of lack of facilities for training and because we lack the opportunity to make use of their services without resorting to mixed crews, which is a policy contrary to the president's program. without resorting to mixing crews in the fleet, which Knox reminded the President that this was a policy contrary to the president's program.

The president approved my recommendation and instructed me to tell you to advise [Maj.] Gen. [Lewis B.] Hershey [the Director of Selective Service] for his guidance of this verbal order and I trust you will attend to this matter at once. ¹⁴⁶

The problem of drafting men by race was a major concern of the Selective Service and its parent organization, the War Manpower Commission, chaired by Paul V. McNutt. At a time when a general shortage of manpower was developing and American industry was beginning to feel the effects of the draft, African Americans still made up only 6% of the armed forces, a little over half their percentage of the American population, and almost all of these were in the Army. ¹⁴⁷ Chairman McNutt explained to Secretary Knox as he had to Secretary Stimson that the practice of placing separate calls for African American and white inductees could no longer

¹⁴⁵ "BuPers Hist," p. 12.

¹⁴⁶ Memorandum, Sec. of the Navy Frank Knox for Rear Adm. Randall Jacobs, 5 February 1943, Navy and Old Army Branch, National Archives, Washington, DC.

be justified. On February 17, 1943, Chairman McNutt wrote to Knox that:

The practice of placing separate calls for white and colored registrants is a position which is not tenable, and it is now necessary to begin delivering men in accordance with their order number without regard to race or color.¹⁴⁸

Chairman McNutt also pointed out there were serious social and legal implications in the existing draft practices:

The low percentage of Negroes in the Army and in the Navy has resulted in a higher percentage of Negroes in the civilian population. This situation is made more serious because of the geographical concentration of Negroes and because nearly all of the men involved, Negro and white, have been single... This condition has been the cause of continuous and mounting criticism. It possessed grave implications, should the issue be taken into the courts, especially by a white registrant. The probability of this action increases as the single white registrants disappear and husbands and fathers become the current white inductees, while single negro registrants who are physically fit remain uninducted.¹⁴⁹

He also pointed out that the Selective Service Act itself prohibited racial discrimination. After the Navy came under Selective Service, it was the Bureau's expectation that the old quota of about 1200 general service and 1500 messmen could be continued.¹⁵⁰ On February 22, 1943, President Roosevelt suggested to Knox:

Perhaps a check by you showing exactly where all white enlisted men are serving and where all colored enlisted men are serving will show you the great number of places where colored men could serve, where they are not serving now--shore duty of all kinds, together with the handling of many kinds of yard craft.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁷ "BuPers Hist," p. 11.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ "BuPers Hist," p. 12.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

He emphasized that there would also be much criticism if African Americans were not used in proportion to their numbers in the population:

The point of the thing is this. There is going to be a great deal of feeling if the Government in winning this war does not employ approximately 10 percent of Negroes—their actual percentage to the total population. The army is nearly up to this percentage but the navy is so far below it that it will be deeply criticized by anybody who wants to check into the details.

You know the headache we have had about this and the reluctance of the navy to have any Negroes. You and I had to veto that navy reluctance, and I think we have to do it again.¹⁵²

In an effort to preserve their quota concept, the Bureau of Naval Personnel recommended an increase from the existing total quota of 2,700 African Americans per month to 5,000 in April and 7,350 for each of the remaining months of 1943. Mess attendants were to be increased from 1,500 to 2,500 per month, 4,750 would be trained for general service, and 1,000 would go to the Seabees.¹⁵³ With these figures in hand, Knox wrote to the War Manpower Commission that the Navy, Coast Guard, and Marine Corps would absorb up to 10% of African Americans in their personnel, but that separate white and African American calls must be continued for the time being to permit adjusting the flow of African Americans to the expansion of needed facilities. On March 2nd, the War Manpower Commission expressed its gratification at the Navy's statement, agreed to the temporary continuation of separate calls, and requested figures for the monthly calls planned by the Navy and its related services.

The Navy interpreted its obligation to take up to 10% African Americans as meaning up

¹⁵² Memorandum, President Roosevelt for Secretary of the Navy Knox, 22 February 1943, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, NY.

¹⁵³ "BuPers Hist," p. 12.

to 10% of the total increase of its personnel between February 1943 and January 1, 1944, which amounted to 80,350. The War Manpower Commission found this unsatisfactory and requested the induction of approximately 125,000 African Americans for that period. Chairman McNutt stated that this figure “will enable us to plan for the initiation of general calls without specification as to the respective number of Negro and White registrants.” The Navy finally reached a compromise with the War Manpower Commission: African Americans would be inducted at the rate of 12,000 per month for the rest of 1943, for a total of 107,650 by the end of the year, with enough expansion of the early months’ quotas in 1944 to make up the remainder of the War Manpower Commission’s 125,000 figure.¹⁵⁴

Total African American enlistments never reached 10% of the Navy’s wartime enlisted strength but remained nearer the 5% mark. But this figure masks the Navy’s racial picture in the latter part of the war after it became dependent on Selective Service. The Navy drafted 150,955 African Americans during World War II, 11.1% of all the men it drafted. In 1943 alone the Navy placed calls with Selective Service for 116,000 African American draftees. Although Selective Service was unable to fill the monthly request completely, the Navy received 77,854 African American draftees (versus 672,437 whites) that year, a 240% rise over the 1942 African American enlistment rate.¹⁵⁵

Thanks to President Roosevelt, the War Manpower Commission, not the military, would decide how many African Americans the armed services would be inducted through the Selective Service System. Because of the president’s action, African Americans entered the Navy by the thousands instead of the hundreds.

¹⁵⁴ “BuPers Hist,” p. 12-13.

¹⁵⁵ Selective Service System, *Special Groups*, vol. II, pp. 198-201.

President Roosevelt indicated that he desired a fairly wide dispersion of African Americans throughout the shore establishment, including their assignment to yard craft and other small vessels. The Bureau of Naval Personnel struggled for several months with the problem of distributing the increased number of African American draftees, and the Bureau of Naval Personnel could invent nothing new. The Navy, Secretary Knox told the president, would continue to segregate African Americans and restrict their service to certain occupations. Its increased African American strength would be absorbed in twenty-seven new African American Seabee battalions, in which African Americans would serve overseas as stevedores; in African American crews for harbor craft and local defense forces; and in billets for cooks and port hands. The rest would be sent to shore stations for guard and miscellaneous duties in concentrations up to about 50% of the total station strength. The president approved the Navy's proposals, and the distribution of African Americans followed these lines.¹⁵⁶

To help this program along, the Bureau of Naval Personnel developed two operating rules: African Americans would be assigned only where there was a need, and African Americans from the North would not be assigned to the South. These rules did require some creative administrative adjustments. African Americans were not assigned to naval districts for distribution according to the discretion of the commander, as were white recruits. Rather, after conferring with local commanders, the Bureau of Naval Personnel decided on the number of African Americans to be included in station complements and the types of jobs they would fill. The Bureau then assigned the men to duty accordingly, and the districts were instructed not to change the orders without consulting the Bureau. The Bureau reinforced this rule by allowing

¹⁵⁶ Memos, SecNav for President, 25 Feb and 14 Apr 43, quoted in "BuPersHist," pp. 13-14; Memo, Acting Chief, NavPers, for SecNav, 24 Feb 43, sub: Employment of Colored Personnel in the Navy, Pers 10, GenRecsNav. For Roosevelt's approval see "BuPersHist," p. 14.

the commanders to use African Americans in the ratings for which they had been trained and by sending Bureau representatives to the various commands to check on compliance.

Some navy planners feared that a concentration of African Americans in shore activities might create problems of morale and lead to friction. Whites felt that African Americans were not doing their share when it came to combat, and African Americans resented being barred from combat. Also, there was always a fear that overall efficiency would drop because the shore facilities were staffed by less skilled personnel.¹⁵⁷ Due to this situation, proposals were circulated in the Bureau of Naval Personnel for the inclusion of African Americans on large warships, such as assignment as firemen and ordinary seamen on the new aircraft carriers. But Admiral Jacobs rejected all of these recommendations.¹⁵⁸

Throughout 1943, the Navy maintained that there would be no mixing of crews on large combat vessels other than personnel of the Stewards Mates branch. Rather than integrate warships, the Navy assigned African Americans to laborer positions on navy bases and also began forming “base companies” for assignment to Pacific islands. In the base companies, and indeed in most of its shore assignments for African Americans, the Navy created units in the seaman branch with broadly defined duties, most entailing manual labor. By creating these billets for the classification of African Americans coming from training stations, the Navy fulfilled its pledge to use African Americans in positions related to their skills but avoided sending these men to sea. Whites also resented the fact that African Americans occupied the limited number of shore billets.

¹⁵⁷ “BuPers Hist,” p. 41.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

As African Americans became a larger part of the U.S. Navy, their resentment grew. Most non-rated African American men worked in laborer positions. Also, African Americans were restricted to shore duty, concentrated in large groups, and assigned to jobs with little prestige and few chances of promotion. Furthermore, African American women were excluded from the WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service), the Nursing Corps, and the commissioned ranks.

The Navy boasted that African Americans served in every rating and at every task, but in reality, almost all African Americans were used in a limited range of occupations. Denied general service assignments on combat vessels, African Americans were restricted to the relatively few billets open in the harbor defense, district, and small craft services.

Although assigning African Americans to these duties met President Roosevelt's request for equal opportunity, yard craft, Seabee units, and shore patrols could only employ a small number of the African Americans who entered the Navy via the draft. By March of 1944, the Navy had virtually removed all the whites from its yard craft, but these small vessels were only able to absorb 7,700 out of the approximately 130,000 African American draftees. By 1944, the Seabees, which were still segregated, accounted for only 10% of the African Americans in the service. But the Navy continued to resist assigning African Americans to non-servant billets on its combat vessels.¹⁵⁹

African Americans performed numerous tasks that reminded them of their second-class citizenship in the U.S. Navy. By mid-1944, over 38,000 African American sailors were serving as mess stewards, cooks, and bakers.¹⁶⁰ Navy recruiters were also under pressure to provide

¹⁵⁹ Harrod, "Integration of the Navy (1941-1978)," p. 42.

¹⁶⁰ McGregor, "Integration of the Armed Forces, 1940-1965," p. 72.

more stewards to serve the officers, whose numbers also multiplied in the early months of World War II. Often recruiters took in many who were equipped by education and training for better jobs as stewards, and when these men were immediately put into uniforms and trained on the job at local naval stations, the results were often dismaying. The Navy received bad service as well as unwelcome publicity for maintaining a segregated servants' branch.

In an effort to standardize the training of Navy messmen, the Bureau of Naval Personnel established a school for stewards in the spring of 1943 at Norfolk, Virginia and one later at Bainbridge, Maryland. This change in training intensified the feeling of isolation among African American stewards.

Another 12,000 African Americans served as artisans and laborers for overseas bases. Over 7,000 of these men were Seabees, who, with the exception of two regular construction battalions that served with distinction in the Pacific, were relegated to "special" battalions stevedoring cargo and supplies. The rest were laborers in base companies assigned to the South Pacific. White officers commanded these units, and almost all of the petty officers were white.¹⁶¹

About half of the African Americans in the Navy were detailed to shore billets within the continental United States. Most worked as laborers at ammunition or supply depots, at air stations, and at section bases, or they were concentrated in large all-African American groups and sometimes commanded by incompetent white officers.¹⁶² While some billets existed in practically every important rating for graduates of the segregated specialty schools, these jobs were so few that African American specialists were often assigned instead to perform unskilled

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Nelson, "Integration of the Negro," p. 46.

labor. Some of these men were among the most educated African Americans in the Navy, men who were able to articulate their dissatisfaction with U.S. navy policies. They resented the fact that they were banned from combat, and their resentment, spreading through the thousands of African Americans in the shore establishment, was a prime cause of racial tensions.¹⁶³

Moreover, no African American women were admitted to the Navy. Race was not mentioned in the legislation creating the WAVES in 1942, and exclusion based on race was not forbidden by the Navy either. The WAVES and the Women's Reserve of both the Coast Guard (SPARS) and the Marine Corps therefore celebrated their second birthdays as all-white organizations. In answer to the protests of Eleanor Roosevelt, the Navy admitted in November 1943 that it had a shortage of nurses, but since another 500 nurses were in training, the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery explained, "The question relative to the necessity for accepting colored personnel in this category is not apparent."¹⁶⁴

Another major cause of unrest among African American sailors was rank and promotion. With the exception of the Coast Guard, the Navy had no African American officers in 1943. Nor was there much opportunity for advancement in the ranks. Barred from service in the fleet, the non-rated seamen faced strong competition for the limited number of petty officer positions in the shore establishment.

¹⁶³ Memo, Acting Chief, NavPers, for Commandants, AINav Districts et al., 26 Feb 44, sub: Enlisted Personnel-Utilization of in Field for which Specifically Trained, Pers 16-3/MM, BuPersRecs.

¹⁶⁴ Letter, Eleanor Roosevelt to SecNav, 20 Nov 43; Letter, SecNav to Mrs. Roosevelt, 27 Nov 43; both in BUMED-S-EC, GenRecsNav.

The most common complaints among African Americans were about segregated housing, messing, and recreation. Segregation was particularly hard on African Americans who had never experienced legal segregation while they were civilians, and on educated African Americans.

Tension in the ranks often erupted into racial disturbances. The first sign of serious unrest occurred in June 1943, when over half the 650 African Americans of the Naval Ammunition Depot at St. Julien's Creek, Virginia, rioted against the segregated seating for a radio show. In July, 744 African Americans of the 80th Construction Battalion staged a protest over segregation on a transport in the Caribbean. Naval investigators cited leadership problems as a major factor in these and subsequent incidents.¹⁶⁵

Since African American enlistment began, there was a need for a body to coordinate the plans and policies on the training and utilization of African American sailors. Various plans were considered, but only after the aforementioned racial disturbances did the Bureau of Naval Personnel set up a Special Programs Unit in its Planning and Control Activity Division, to oversee the whole African American enlistment program. In the end the size of the unit governed the scope of its program.

Originally the unit was to monitor the actions involving African Americans in the Bureau's operating divisions, thus relieving the Enlisted Division of the task of distributing billets for African Americans. It also advised local commanders on racial problems and interpreted Navy policies. The Special Programs Unit was finally established in August of 1943, and it consisted of three officers led by Lt. Comdr. Christopher S. Sargent. Out of the activities of the Special Programs unit emerged the plans that finally integrated the Navy.

¹⁶⁵ "BuPers Hist," pp. 75-80.

The Unit first attacked the concentration of African Americans in large segregated groups in the naval districts by creating more overseas billets. Toward the end of 1943, African Americans were assigned in greater numbers to Pacific shore installations and aboard small defense, district, and yard craft. The Bureau of Naval Personnel also created new specialties for African Americans in the general service. One important addition was the creation of African American shore patrol units, for which a school was started at Great Lakes. The Special Programs Unit also established a remedial training center for illiterate draftees at Camp Robert Smalls; the faculty would be African American servicemen who had been teachers in civilian life. The twelve-week course gave the students the equivalent of a fifth-grade education in addition to regular recruit training. About 15,000 African Americans took this training before the school was consolidated with a similar organization for whites at Bainbridge, Maryland in the last months of the war.¹⁶⁶

The Special Programs Unit then wrestled with the issue of improper assignments. The Bureau of Naval Personnel believed that the proper assignment of African American specialists was important to morale and efficiency, and in July 1943, it ordered that "...activities must use Negroes in the rates for which they had been trained."¹⁶⁷ But the Special Programs Unit found that some districts had deviated from this policy, especially in the South, where there was a "...tendency to regard the Negro program as a labor source above the normal allocation for the Navy's service needs." According to the Special Programs Unit, African Americans "...could not be used for automotive maintenance work, despite the extreme difficulties of maintaining the usual civilian staffs, because these were not military billets." Also, in December of 1943, the

¹⁶⁶ Nelson, *Integration of the Negro*, pp. 124-146.

¹⁶⁷ "BuPers Hist," p. 53.

Unit was able to convince the Bureau of Naval Personnel that except for the special units in the naval supply departments at South Boston and Norfolk, no African American sailor would be assigned to such civilian jobs as maintenance work and stevedoring within the continental United States.”¹⁶⁸

These reforms were a start, but the only way to abolish concentrations of shore-based African Americans was to open up jobs for them in the fleet. Many African American sailors were best suited for skilled or semi-skilled billets, but a large number of them had technical skills that could be properly used only if they were assigned to the fleet. In the early months of 1944, the Bureau of Naval Personnel, with the approval of the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Ernest J. King, assigned 196 African American enlisted men and forty-four white officers and petty officers to the USS *Mason*, a newly commissioned destroyer escort. White personnel were assigned the more specialized billets with the understanding that African Americans would take over these duties as soon as they were deemed qualified. The Bureau also assigned fifty-three African American rated seamen and fourteen white officers and noncommissioned officers to a patrol craft, the *PC 1264*. The eight white petty officers serving aboard this submarine chaser served as instructors and remained on board until the African American crew was fully trained. Both ships eventually replaced their white petty officers and some of their officers with African Americans. Among the latter was Ensign Samuel Gravely, who would become the U.S. Navy’s first African American admiral.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁸ “BuPers Hist,” p. 53.

¹⁶⁹ Memo, Chief, BuPers, for CINCUSFLEET, 1 Dec 43, sub: Negro Personnel, P16/MM, BuPersRecs. The latter experiment has been chronicled by its commanding officer, Eric Purdon, in *Black Company: The Story of Subchaser 1264* (Washington: Luce, 1972).

Although the *Mason* and the *PC 1264* continued to operate with African American crewmen well into 1945, only four other segregated patrol craft were added to the fleet during World War II.¹⁷⁰ The Bureau of Naval Personnel was unsatisfied with the performance of the *Mason*'s crew. African American petty officers had proved competent in their ratings and interested in their work, but the rated men were unable to maintain discipline. Nonrated men lacked respect for their petty officers, who hesitated to put their men on report. The Special Programs Unit acknowledged the validity of these charges but argued that African American sailors did not respond well when they were assigned to all-African American organizations under white officers.¹⁷¹ On the other hand, the experiment with the *Mason* showed that the U.S. Navy possessed a supply of able seamen who were not being employed efficiently and that integration could work. White petty officers had no problem messing with, working with, and sleeping in close proximity to African American crewmembers.

Opportunities to advance were just as important to morale as assignments according to skill. The Special Programs Unit encouraged the promotion of African Americans according to their skills and in proportion to their numbers. Although the Bureau of Naval Personnel had warned commanders that it would continue to order white enlisted men to sea with the expectation that they would be replaced in shore jobs by African Americans, the Special Programs Unit discovered that the rating and promotion of African Americans was proceeding at a snail's pace.¹⁷² At the urging of the Special Programs Unit, the Bureau of Naval Personnel advised all naval districts that it expected African Americans to be rated upward as quickly as

¹⁷⁰ Memo, CNO for Commandant, First and Fifth Naval Districts, 10 May 44, sub: Assignment of Negro Personnel, P-16-3/MM, BuPersRecs.

¹⁷¹ "BuPersHist," pp. 42-43 and 92.

¹⁷² BuPers Letter, P16-3, 12 Jul 43, sub: The Expanded Use of Negroes, BuPersRecs.

possible and asked them to report on their rating of African Americans.¹⁷³ The Bureau also authorized stations to retain white petty officers for up to two weeks to break in their African American replacements, but warned that this privilege must not be abused. In addition, the Bureau also said that all qualified general service candidates be advanced to ratings for which they were eligible regardless of whether their units were authorized enough slots to take care of them. This did little to promote African Americans, because many local commanders felt that no African Americans could be “qualified,” since none of them had had sea duty.¹⁷⁴

Despite these examples of command concerns, the promotion of African American sailors continued to lag. Again with the urging of the Special Programs Unit’s, the Bureau of Naval Personnel began to limit the number of rated men turned out by the African American training schools so that more nonrated men already on the job might have a chance at a higher rating. The Bureau proceeded to institute a specialist leadership course for rated African Americans at Great Lakes and recommended in January 1944 that two of these African Americans be included in each base company sent abroad. It also selected twelve African Americans with backgrounds in education and public relations and assigned them to recruiting duty. The Bureau of Naval Personnel expanded the African American petty officer program because it was convinced that the presence of more African American leaders, particularly in the large base companies, would improve discipline and morale.

The influx of African Americans into the Navy’s enlisted ranks, 100,000 to be exact, dramatized the absence of African Americans in the officer corps in the fall of 1943. Since no

¹⁷³ Letter, Chief, NavPers, to Commandants, All Naval Districts, 19 Aug 43, sub: Advancements in Rating re: Negro Personnel, P17-2/MM, BuPersRecs.

¹⁷⁴ BuPers Cir Letter 6-44, 12 Jan 44.

African American had yet received a commission, in September 1943, Adlai E. Stevenson, an assistant to Secretary of the Navy Knox, believed that this situation had to be remedied. Stevenson pointed out that, with the induction of 12,000 African Americans a month, calls for African American officers would come from the African American community and from elsewhere in the government. According to Stevenson, the Navy could not and should not postpone the commissioning of some African American officers. Also, the suspicion of discrimination was one reason the Navy was failing to get the most qualified African Americans; the Navy had to act fast. Stevenson proposed that the Navy commission ten or twelve African Americans from among “top notch civilians just as we procure white officers” and a few from the enlisted ranks. Stevenson pointed out that even the Coast Guard had commissioned two African Americans.¹⁷⁵

The Bureau of Naval Personnel decided to choose officer candidates from among the African Americans already on duty. Of the sixteen candidates who entered an accelerated program of training in January 1944, twelve became ensigns in the Naval Reserve on March 17. These twelve commissions broke the color barrier, creating the opening through which African Americans could enter the naval officer corps.

The commissioning of the Navy’s first African American officers became an inspiration to all African Americans, but it did not loosen Jim Crow’s grip on the Navy. The handful of white officers from the Navy’s Special Programs Unit who helped shepherd Stevenson’s proposal through the Navy’s administrative hierarchy knew that something more had to be done, so they instituted a leadership course at Great Lakes designed to prepare African American

¹⁷⁵ Memo, Stevenson for the Secretary [Knox], 29 Sep 43, 54-1-50, GenRecsNav.

seamen for promotion to petty officer. To take advantage of the new course, the Bureau of Naval Personnel went so far as to permit the promotion of qualified African Americans to petty officer even if specific openings for them did not yet exist.

Concerns also surfaced that African American sailors would not respect petty officers of their own race and that the petty officers would prove reluctant to discipline their fellow African Americans. These fears never became reality, however. The Navy's *Guide to the Command of Negro Personnel*, published by the Bureau of Naval Personnel in 1945, apparently intended mainly for white officers, declared: "Contrary to a fairly general belief, it has been found that Negro Naval personnel respond readily to good Negro leadership." Moreover, the guide continued, "Experience has taught ... that colored personnel can be directed and disciplined with less likelihood of dissatisfaction by Negro than by white officers, provided the former are well selected and competent."¹⁷⁶ Left unsaid was that careful selection and competence were equally important for white officers in command of whites.

When Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox died suddenly on April 28, 1944, President Roosevelt replaced him with Under Secretary of the Navy James V. Forrestal, a World War I naval aviator and prewar investment banker who had been active in the National Urban League. Forrestal saw the problem of employing African Americans as one of efficiency and fairness, and as the months went by he assumed an active role in experimenting with changes in the U.S. Navy's racial policies.

Forrestal focused first on the sea duties of African Americans. After the experiment with the *Mason*, a sentiment for the partial integration of the fleet had continued to grow in the Bureau

¹⁷⁶ NavPers 15092, 12 Feb 44, p. 14.

of Naval Personnel. As early as April 1943, officers in the Planning and Control Activity had recommended that small numbers of African Americans be included in the crews of larger combat vessels. Rear Admiral Randall Jacobs, Chief of the Bureau of Naval Personnel, remained convinced that the Navy could not “dump” African Americans on a crew in the midst of battle. As a result, this and similar proposals had not survived passage through the Bureau.

Admiral Jacobs argued that as long as World War II continued, any move towards integrating combat vessels was impractical. Forrestal accepted Jacob’s argument, and he agreed with the Special Programs Unit that large concentrations of African Americans in shore billets lowered efficiency and morale. An obvious solution would have been to assign trained African Americans throughout the fleet, but Forrestal knew that the bureaucracy had rejected similar proposals. On May 20, 1944, Forrestal proposed the assignment of qualified African Americans to large auxiliary vessels such as tankers, ammunition ships, and transports, but not to combat vessels. Forrestal explained to the president that African Americans resented the narrow range of opportunity open to them, and white seamen objected to the prospect of repeated tours of sea duty and the likelihood of combat when African American sailors were filling so many shore-based billets.¹⁷⁷ The Secretary then explained that at first African Americans would be used only on large auxiliaries, and their number would be limited to not more than 10% of the ship’s complement. If this worked, Forrestal planned to use African Americans in small numbers in other ships as necessity indicated. President Roosevelt approved.

Secretary Forrestal also won the support of the Chief of Naval Operations for the move, but Admiral King still considered integration in the fleet experimental and was determined to

¹⁷⁷ Memo, SecNav for President, 20 May 44, Forrestal file, GenRecsNav.

keep strict control until the results were well known. On August 9, 1944, Admiral King informed the commanding officers of twenty-five large fleet auxiliaries that African Americans would be assigned to them in the near future. As Forrestal had previously suggested, King set the maximum number of African Americans at 10% of the ship's general service. Of this number, 15% would be third-class petty officers from shore activities, selected as far as possible from volunteers and, in any case, from those who had served the longest. Of the remainder, 43% would be from Class A schools and 42% from the recruit training.¹⁷⁸ The base 10% figure proved to be a theoretical maximum for no ship received that many African Americans.

Admiral King insisted that equal treatment in matters of training, promotion, and duty assignments must be accorded to all, but he left the matter of berthing to the commanding officers, noting that experience had proved that in the shore establishment, when the percentage of African Americans to whites was small, the two groups could be mingled in the same compartments. He also pointed out that a thorough indoctrination of white sailors before the arrival of the African Americans had been useful in preventing racial disturbances ashore.¹⁷⁹

Admiral King asked all the commanders involved in this experiment of fleet integration to report their experiences. They believed that integration in the auxiliary fleet worked. As one typical report related, after several months of integrated duty:

The crew was carefully indoctrinated in the fact that Negro personnel should not be subjected to discrimination of any sort and should be treated in the same manner as other members of the crew.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Letter, CNO to CO, USS *Antaeus* et al., 9 Aug 44, sub: Negro Enlisted Personnel-Assignment of to Ships of the Fleet, P16-3/MM, OpNavArchives.

The Negro personnel when they came aboard were berthed indiscriminately throughout the crew's compartments in the same manner as if they had been white. It is felt that the assimilation of the general service Negro personnel aboard this ship has been remarkably successful. To the present date there has been no report of any difficulty which could be laid out to their color. It is felt that this is due in part, at least, to the high caliber of Negroes assigned to this ship.¹⁸⁰

These comments convinced Admiral King that integrating the auxiliary vessels worked. He approved a plan submitted by the Chief of Naval Personnel on March 6, 1945 for the gradual assignment of African Americans to all auxiliary vessels, again in numbers not to exceed 20% of the general service billets in any ship's complement.¹⁸¹ A month later African Americans were being so assigned in an administratively routine manner.¹⁸² The Bureau of Naval Personnel then began assigning African American officers to sea duty on the integrated vessels. The first one went to the *Mason* in March, and in succeeding months others were sent in a routine manner to auxiliary vessels throughout the fleet.¹⁸³ These assignments were not always carried out according to the bureau's formula. The commander of the USS *Chemung*, for example, told a young African American ensign:

I'm a Navy Man, and we're in a war. To me, it's that stripe that counts-and the training and leadership that it is supposed to symbolize. That's why I never called a meeting of the crew to prepare them, to explain their obligation to respect you, or anything like that. I didn't want anyone to think that you were different from

¹⁸⁰ Letter, CO, USS *Antaeus*, to Chief, NavPers, 16 Jan 45, sub: Negro Enlisted Personnel-Assignment of Ships of the Fleet, Ag67/P16-3/MM.

¹⁸¹ Memo, Chief, NavPers, for CINCUSFLEET, 6 Mar 1945, sub: Negro Personnel-Expanded Use of, with 1st Ind, from Fleet Admiral, USN for Vice CNO, 28 March 45, same sub, FFI/P16-3/MM, OpNavArchives.

¹⁸² BuPers Cir Letter 105-45, 13 Apr 45, sub: Negro General-Service Personnel, Assignment of to Auxiliary Vessels of the Fleet.

¹⁸³ Letter, Chief, NavPers, to CO, USS *Mason*, 16 March 45, sub: Negro Officer-Assignment if, Pers 2119-FB.

any other officer coming aboard.¹⁸⁴

What began as an experiment soon became policy, as the U.S. Navy began routinely to assign African Americans to a lengthening list of fleet auxiliaries, and, ultimately, to all such ships.

Forrestal seemed to have won the day with these early experiments, but he knew that there would be little hope for social change without the support of the Navy's high-ranking officers. He met with Admiral King on the subject of integration in the summer of 1944, and what transpired has been reported by many. Lester Granger, who would later become Forrestal's civilian aide for monitoring the implementation of the Navy's racial policies, recalled:

He [Forrestal] said that he spoke to Admiral King, who was then chief of staff [sic; King was actually Chief of Naval Operations], and said, 'Admiral King, I'm not satisfied with the situation here-I don't think that our Navy Negro personnel are getting a square break. I want to do something about it, but I can't do anything about it unless the officers are behind me. I want your help. What do you say?'

He said that Admiral King sat for a moment, and looked out the window and then said reflectively, 'You know, we say that we are a democracy and a democracy ought to have a democratic Navy. I don't think that you can do it, but if you want to try, I'm behind you all the way.' And he told me, 'And Admiral King was behind me, all the way, not only he but all of the Bureau of Naval Personnel, BuPers. They've been bricks.'¹⁸⁵

Admiral Jacobs, the Chief of Naval Personnel, pledged his support as well.

As news of this conversation filtered through the Navy, many of the programs suggested by the Special Programs Unit that up to this point had been treated with indifference, suddenly received attention. Now with the cooperation of the Navy's high-ranking officers, Forrestal began to wrestle with some of the more obvious forms of discrimination and causes of racial

¹⁸⁴ Quoted in Rowan, "Those Navy Boys Changed My Life," pp. 57-58.

¹⁸⁵ Quoted in the Columbia University Oral History Interview with Granger.

tensions. Admiral King led this attack, personally directing in August 1944 that all elements pay close attention to the proper selection of officers to command African American sailors. As he put it: “Certain officers will be temperamentally better suited for such commands than others.”¹⁸⁶ Also, the qualifications of these officers were to be kept under constant review by the Bureau of Naval Personnel. In December he singled out the commands in the Pacific area, which had a heavy concentration of all-African American base companies, for a reform in the employment and advancement of African Americans.¹⁸⁷

The Bureau of Naval Personnel also quickened the pace of its reform movement. In March 1944, it had already made African American cooks and bakers eligible for duty in all commissary branches of the U.S. Navy.¹⁸⁸ In June it received permission from the Secretary of the Navy to put all rated cooks and stewards in chief petty officer uniforms.¹⁸⁹ While finally providing for the proper “uniforming” of the chief cooks and stewards, this measure set their subordinates, the rated cooks and stewards, even further apart from their counterparts in the general service, who of course continued to wear the familiar bell bottoms. The Bureau also began to focus its attention on the concentration of African Americans in ammunition depots and base companies. On February 21, 1945, the Bureau ordered all naval magazines and ammunition depots in the United States and overseas to limit their African

¹⁸⁶ Quoted in Nelson, “Integration of the Negro,” p. 46.

¹⁸⁷ Dir, CNO, to Forward Areas, Dec 44, quoted in Nelson’s “Integration of the Negro,” p. 51.

¹⁸⁸ BuPers Cir Letter 72-44, 13 Mar 44, sub: Negro Personnel of the Commissary Branch, Assignment to Duty of.

¹⁸⁹ Idem, 182-44, 29 Jun 44, “Uniform for Chief Cooks and Chief Stewards and Cooks and Stewards.”

American seamen to 30% of the total employed.¹⁹⁰ It also organized twenty logistic support companies to replace the formless base companies sent to the Pacific in the early months of the African American recruitment program. Organized to perform supply functions, each company consisted of 250 enlisted men and five officers, with a flexible range of petty officer billets.

In the reform atmosphere slowly permeating the Bureau of Naval Personnel, the Special Programs Unit found it easy to end segregation in the specialist training program.¹⁹¹ From the beginning, the number of African Americans eligible for specialist training had been too small to make costly duplication of equipment and services practical. In 1943, for example, the African American aviation metalsmith school at Great Lakes had an average enrollment of eight students. The school was quietly closed, and its students were integrated with whites. Thus, when the *Mason's* complement was assembled in 1944, African Americans entered the destroyer school at Norfolk side by side with whites, and the African American and white petty officers were quartered together. As a consequence of placing African Americans in the auxiliary fleet, the Bureau of Naval Personnel opened up training in seagoing rates to African Americans on an integrated basis. Citing the practicality of the move, the Bureau closed the last of the African American schools in June of 1945.¹⁹²

A number of racial incidents took place in 1943 and 1944 that indicated that African Americans were not satisfied with their status in the U.S. Navy. Although most of these

¹⁹⁰ Idem, 45-18, 21 Feb 45, and 45-46, 31 May 45, sub: Negro Enlisted Personnel-Limitation on Assignment of to Naval Ammunition Depots and Naval Magazines.

¹⁹¹ Letter, Dr. M.A. F. Ritchie to James C. Evans, 13 Aug 65, Center of Military History files.

¹⁹² BuPers Cir Letter 194-44, sub: Advanced Schools, Nondiscrimination in Selection of Personnel for Training in: Letter, Chief, NavPers, to CO, AdComd, NavTraCen, 12 Jun 45, sub: Selection of Negro Personnel for Instruction in Class "A" Schools, 54-1-21, GenRecsNav.

incidents were minor and attracted little outside publicity, three in 1944 made headlines and helped focus national attention on African American grievances.¹⁹³

The first was a mutiny at Mare Island, California on July 17, 1944, after an explosion destroyed two ammunition ships loading at nearby Port Chicago. The explosion killed over 300, including 250 African American seamen who had been toiling in large, segregated labor battalions. The survivors refused to return to work, voicing concerns about the safety of their assignment. Finally, after persuading most to return to duty, the Navy tried and convicted the fifty holdouts for disobeying orders. The fifty were convicted of mutiny and sentenced to prison. The Port Chicago mutiny became a *cause célèbre*. Finally, through the intervention of the African American press, African American organizations, Thurgood Marshall and Lester Granger, the Navy was forced to set aside the convictions and the men were returned to active duty in January 1946.

A riot on Guam in December of 1944 was the climax of months of friction between African American seamen and white marines. A series of shootings in and around the town of Agana on Christmas Eve left an African American and a white marine dead. Believing that the man who was killed was a member of their unit, African American sailors from the Naval Supply Depot drove into town to confront the outnumbered military police. No violence ensued, but on the next day, two truckloads of armed African Americans went to the white Marine camp. The African American sailors rioted and forty-three African Americans were arrested by the military police, charged with rioting and stealing the trucks. They were each sentenced by the Navy to up to four years in prison. The authorities also recommended that several of the white

¹⁹³ “BuPersHist,” p. 75.

marines involved be court-martialed. These men were also convicted by the Navy of various offenses and sentenced.¹⁹⁴ Walter White of the NAACP went to Guam to investigate the matter and appeared as a principal witness before the Marine Court of Inquiry. There he pieced together for Marine officials the long history of discrimination suffered by men of the base company. According to White, this situation, combined with poor leadership in the unit, caused the trouble. His efforts and those of other civil rights advocates led to the release of the African American sailors in early 1946.

In March 1945 members of an African American construction battalion at Port Hueneme, California, protested nonviolently against their white commander's racism by refusing to eat for two days. The resulting publicity forced the Navy to investigate the charges; as a result, the commanding officer, the focus of the grievance, was replaced by the Navy and the outfit was subsequently sent overseas.

These riots, mutinies, and other incidents increased the pressure for the further modification of the Navy's racial policy. Some senior officers became convinced that the only way to avoid rebellious actions was to avoid the possibility of collective action, and collective action would be less likely if African Americans were dispersed among whites. Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, commander of the Pacific Fleet, and a proponent of the theory that integration was a practical means of avoiding trouble, explained to the captain of a cargo ship who had just received a group of African American crewmen and was segregating their sleeping quarters:

If you put all the Negroes together they'll have a chance to share grievances and to plot among themselves, and this will damage discipline and morale. If they are distributed among other members of the crew, their will be less chance of trouble.

¹⁹⁴ Henry I. Shaw, Jr., and Ralph W. Donnelly, *Blacks in the Marine Corps* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1975), pp. 44-45.

And when we say we want integration, we mean *integration*.¹⁹⁵

If these racial incidents convinced high Navy officials that further reforms were needed, they also seem to have strengthened Forrestal's resolve to introduce greater changes in the Navy's policy. For months Forrestal had listened to the arguments of senior officials and naval experts that the integration of the fleet was impossible during wartime, but he saw integration work on small patrol craft and on fleet auxiliaries. In fact, integration worked well wherever it was tried. Although hard to prove, the evidence suggests that Forrestal and Admiral King agreed to fully integrate the general service in the weeks after the racial incident on Guam.

Forrestal and King continually received advice. In December of 1944, a group of African American publicists called upon Forrestal to appoint a civilian aide to consider the problems of the African American in the Navy. The group also added its voice to those in the Navy who were advocating the appointment of an African American public relations officer to disseminate news of particular interest to the African American press and to improve the Navy's relations with the African American community.¹⁹⁶ One of Forrestal's assistants proposed that an interdepartmental committee be organized to standardize the disparate approaches to racial problems throughout the naval establishment; another recommended the appointment of an African American civilian to advise the Bureau of Naval Personnel, and still another recommended a white assistant on racial affairs in the office of the under secretary.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁵ White, *A Man Called White*, p. 273.

¹⁹⁶ Letter, John H. Sengstacke to Forrestal, 19 Dec 44, 54-1-9, GenRecsNav.

¹⁹⁷ Memo, Under Sec Bard for SecNav, 1 Jan 45, 54-1-9, Forrestal file, GenRecsNav; Memo H. Struve Hensel (Off of Gen Counsel) for Forrestal, 5 Jan 45, 54-1-9, Forrestal file, GenRecsNav.

The Special Programs Unit had for some time been urging a public relations effort, pointing to the existence of an influential African American press as well as to the desirability of fostering a greater knowledge among whites of the role of African Americans in the war. Forrestal brought two African American officers to Washington for possible assignment to public relations work, and he asked the director of public relations to arrange for African American newsmen to visit vessels manned by African American crewmen. The fates of these men were unclear. Finally, in June 1945, an African American officer was added by Forrestal to the staff of the Navy's Office of Public Relations.¹⁹⁸

The appointment of a civilian aide on racial affairs was under consideration for some time, but no agreement could be reached on where best to assign the official. Forrestal, who wanted someone he could "casually talk to about race relations,"¹⁹⁹ invited the Executive Secretary of the National Urban League to "give us some of your time for a period."²⁰⁰ Lester B. Granger's task was straightforward. From time to time he would tour various naval installations and report his findings and recommendations for fair racial practices. Thus in March of 1945, Lester B. Granger began his long association with the Department of Defense, an association that would span the American military's entire integration effort.²⁰¹

Lester Granger was a trained specialist in social service work who believed in social equality. He could be depended upon to report honestly what he saw and heard, and he was

¹⁹⁸ Memo, SecNav for Eugene Duffield (Asst to Under Sec), 16 Jan 45, 54-1-9, Forrestal file, GenRecsNav; idem for Rear Admiral A. Stanton Merrill (Dir of Pub Relations), 24 Mar and 4 May 45, 54-1-16, Forrestal file, GenRecsNav.

¹⁹⁹ Forrestal, "Remarks for Dinner of Urban League."

²⁰⁰ Letter, SecNav to Lester Granger, 1 Feb 45, Forrestal File, GenRecsNav.

²⁰¹ Letters, Granger to Forrestal, 19 Mar and 3 Apr 45, 54-1-13, Forrestal file, GenRecsNav.

creative enough to recommend concrete measures to bring about the desired fairness and equality. Forrestal liked the Urban League's approach to racial justice, and he now had an assistant who had developed this approach into a social philosophy.

Granger believed in relating the racial problems present in the U.S. Navy not to questions of fairness but to questions of survival, comfort, and security for all concerned. Granger assumed that once a leader in any field understood that his privilege and or his security was threatened by the denial of fairness to the less privileged, then a meeting of minds might be possible between the two groups. They would begin to find ways to eliminate the threat and once this was done, the result would be fairness. As Granger explained it, talking to a naval commander about his loss of efficient production, not the fact that he denied an African American's right to a job. Granger also suggested talking about the "... social costs that come from denial of opportunity and also talking about the penalty that the privileged pay almost in equal measure to what the Negro pays, but in different coin. Only then would one begin to get a hearing."²⁰² On the other hand, Granger suggested talking to African Americans not about achieving their rights but about taking advantage of their opportunities.

At Forrestal's request, Granger explained how he viewed the special adviser's role. Granger thought he could help "ease" along the integration process in the general service by consulting with local commanders and their men in a series of field visits. He could also act as a liaison between the Navy Department and the civil rights organizations and the African American press. Granger urged the formation of an advisory council, which would be consist of ranking members from the Navy's various branches, to interpret and administer the Navy's racial

²⁰² Columbia University Oral History Interview with Lester Granger, quoted in McGregor's, *Integration of the Armed Forces, 1940-1965*, " p. 95.

policy. Although, in 1945, the Bureau of Naval Personnel had increased the resources of the Special Programs Unit, the only organization dealing with racial problems, the unit was always too swamped with administrative details to police racial problems outside Washington. Moreover, the Seabees and the Medical and Surgery Department were in some ways independent of the bureau, and their employment of African American sailors was different from that of other branches. This was a situation that created further confusion and conflict in the application of the Navy's racial policies.²⁰³

Assuming that the advisory council would require an executive, Granger suggested that the Secretary of the Navy have a full-time assistant for race relations. Granger wanted the man to be African American, and he wanted him in the Secretary of the Navy's office, which would give him prestige in the African American community and increase his power to deal with the bureaus. Forrestal rejected the idea of a council and a full-time assistant, saying that he must avoid creating another formal organization. Instead, he decided to assemble an informal committee, which he invited Granger to join, to standardize the Navy's handling of African Americans.

Convinced that the Navy's senior officials had finally shifted their thinking on equal treatment and opportunity for African Americans in the U.S. Navy, Forrestal was content with letting certain reforms spread slowly throughout the Navy. Forrestal would later refer to the Navy's wartime reforms as "a start down a long road."²⁰⁴

²⁰³ Memo, Chief, NavPers, for Cmdr Richard M. Paget (Exec Office of the SecNav), 21 Apr 45, sub: Organization of Advisory Committee, Pers 2119, GenRecsNav.

²⁰⁴ Letter, Forrestal to Marshall Field III (publisher of *PM*), 14 Jul 45, 54-1-13, Forrestal File, GenRecsNav.

In the final months of World War II, more barriers to equal treatment were crumbling. In March of 1945, after months of prodding by Forrestal, the Surgeon General announced that the Navy would accept a “reasonable” number of qualified African American nurses and would begin recruiting for them.²⁰⁵ In June, the Bureau of Naval Personnel ordered the integration of recruit training, assigning African American general service recruits to the nearest recruit training command “to obtain the maximum utilization of naval training and housing facilities.”²⁰⁶ Noting that this integration was at odds with some individuals’ attitudes, the bureau justified the change on the grounds of administrative efficiency. Again, plans were set in motion in July, by Forrestal, for the assignment of African Americans to submarine and pilot training.²⁰⁷ At the same time Lester Granger, acting as the secretary’s personal representative, was visiting the Navy’s continental installations, prodding commanders and converting them to the Navy’s new policy.

The progress on racial issues that was made in the Navy was the result of several forces. At first African Americans were restricted to service as messmen, but political pressures forced the Navy to open all general service billets to them; the influence of civil rights spokesmen were significant. They and their allies in Congress and in national political parties caused the president to demand a cessation of the exclusion and the Navy to accept African Americans for segregated service. The presence of a large number of African American inductees and the

²⁰⁵ Memo, SecNav for Rear Admiral W.J.C. Agnew, Asst Surgeon General, 28 Jan 45, 54-1-3, Forrestal file, GenRecsNav; Memo, Surgeon Gen for Eugene Duffield, 19 Mar 45, 54-1-3, Forrestal file, GenRecsNav.

²⁰⁶ Letter, Chief, NavPers, to Commandants, All Naval Districts, 11 Jun 45, sub: Negro Recruit Training-Discontinuance of Special Program and Camps for, P16-3/MM, BuPersRecs.

²⁰⁷ Memo, SecNav for Artemus L. Gates, Asst Sec for Air, et al., 16 Jul 45, 54-1-20, GenRecsNav; Letter, SecNav to Granger, 14 Jul 45, 54-1-20, GenRecsNav.

limited number of assignments for them in the segregated units kept the Bureau of Naval Personnel from providing even a semblance of separate but equal conditions. The deterioration of African American morale and the fear of racial disturbances forced the Bureau of Naval Personnel to experiment with all-African American crews, but these experiments achieved no significant results. The Navy could never operate a separate but equal fleet. Finally, in 1944 Secretary Forrestal began to experiment with integration in seagoing assignments.

Integration of the Navy was still incomplete. There were few whites in the messmen's branch. There were instances of discrimination in training, assignments, promotions, facilities, and recreational opportunities. The influence of civil rights forces can often be overstated by historians, because, their efforts tended to focus more on the Army, especially towards the end of World War II. The attacks they made on the Navy were mostly sporadic and uncoordinated and were easily deflected by naval spokesmen. Equally important to racial reform was that the Navy was developing its own civil rights advocates during the war. These were men in important positions who were dissatisfied with the prewar status of African Americans and who pushed for racial change in the name of military efficiency. Under Forrestal's sympathetic leadership, helped by Adlai Stevenson and other advisers in his office and in the Bureau of Naval Personnel, the Navy was laying the groundwork for a racially integrated Navy by the time Japan surrendered.

Equal treatment and opportunities for African Americans in the U.S. Navy took more than the development of an integration policy; integration policies and practices affected only a small percentage of African Americans in the U.S. Navy. By the end of World War II, the U.S. Navy counted 164,942 African American sailors (including about sixty enlisted women), 5.37%

of the total enlisted strength.²⁰⁸ More than twice the prewar percentage, this figure was still less than half the national ratio of the African American population. In August 1945 the Navy had sixty African American officers, six of whom were women (four nurses and two WAVES), and sixty-eight enlisted WAVES who were not segregated. Thus, the integration of the Naval officer corps, the WAVES and the nurses impacted only 128 people. Figures for African American enlisted men show that they were employed in sixty-seven ratings by the end of the war, but steward and steward's mates ratings accounted for some 68,000 men, about 40% of the total African American enlistment. Approximately, 59,000 others were ordinary seamen. Some were recruits in training or specialists striking for ratings, but most of them were assigned to large segregated labor units and base companies.²⁰⁹

Also, there was always a chance that even this "limited" progress might only be temporary. On V-J Day the Regular Navy had 7,006 African Americans, just 2.14% of its total manpower.²¹⁰ Many of these men could be expected to stay in the postwar U.S. Navy, but the overwhelming majority of them were in the separate Steward's Branch and would remain there well after World War II ended. African American reservists in wartime general service would have to compete with white regulars and reservists for the severely reduced number of postwar billets and commissions in a Navy to be made up almost exclusively of regulars. Although Granger had suggested this to Secretary Forrestal before, neither Forrestal nor the Bureau of Naval Personnel considered it before the end of the war.

²⁰⁸ Pers 215-BL, "Enlisted Strength-U.S. Navy," 26 Jul 46, BuPersRecs.

²⁰⁹ Pers 215-12-EL, "Number of Negro Enlisted Personnel on Active Duty," 29 Nov 45 (statistics as of Oct 45), BuPersRecs.

²¹⁰ Pers-215-BL, "Enlisted Strength-U.S. Navy," 26 Jul 46.

The Navy's search for a postwar policy really began in the last months of World War II when Secretary Forrestal approved the formation of an informal Committee on Negro Personnel. This committee, headed by Captain Roscoe H. Hillenkoetter, would examine existing naval policies and the changes proposed by Lester Granger, Forrestal's adviser on racial matters. Although Granger had originally proposed the establishment of such a committee to "help frame sound and effective racial policies,"²¹¹ the Chief of Naval Personnel saw an altogether different reason for the group. He approved of the idea for this committee "...not because there is anything wrong or backward about our policies," but because "we need greater cooperation from the technical Bureaus in order that those policies may succeed."²¹² But Forrestal did little to define the committee's purpose. On April 16, 1945 he ordered Under Secretary Bard to organize a committee "to assure uniform policies" and see that all subdivisions of the Navy were familiar with each other's successful and unsuccessful racial practices.²¹³

Forrestal hoped to pull "backward" branches of the Navy into line with more "liberal" ones so that the reforms of 1944 would be accepted throughout the Navy. But, as he did before in regards or racial policies, Forrestal failed to give clear-cut directions to this "informal committee." He followed the recommendations of the Chief of Naval Personnel, who wanted the committee to be a "military" group, despite having earlier expressing his intention of inviting Lester B. Granger to head the committee. On April 25 it was announced that the committee was

²¹¹ Letter, Lester Granger to SecNav, 19 March 1945, 54-1-13, Forrestal file, GenRecsNav.

²¹² Memo, Chief, NavPers, for Commander Richard M. Paget (Exec Off, SecNav), 21 April 1945, subject: Formation of Informal Committee to Assure Uniform Policies on the Handling of Negro Personnel, P-17, BuPersRecs.

²¹³ Memo, SecNav for Commander Richard M. Paget, 16 April 1945, 54-1-19, Forrestal file, GenRecsNav.

to be chaired by a senior official of the Bureau of Naval Personnel, Captain Roscoe H. Hillenkoetter, with another of the bureau's officers serving as committee recorder. Other members of the committee included four senior Navy captains and representatives of the Marine Corps and Coast Guard. The Committee would assign each of its members to investigate the racial practices in his own organization. After endorsing the conclusion that racial segregation resulted in the inefficient use of manpower, the group called for a policy that would promote efficiency by assigning every sailor not by race but according to his ability and the needs of the service.

Granger made an inspection tour in August 1945 that reinforced his belief that efficiency improved as a result of integration. Morale, he reported, tended to be low in those labor units manned mostly by African Americans. Granger was especially concerned that the Steward Branch, with its dominant African American representation, could well disrupt the integration process.

In the postwar U.S. Navy, according to official U.S. Navy policy, African Americans were to be eligible for “all types of assignments in all ratings in all activities and all ships of the naval service.” By October 1, 1946, African American sailors, with the exception of the stewards at Annapolis, were reassigned by the Bureau of Naval Personnel so the proportion of African Americans in any ship or activity would not exceed 10%. ²¹⁴

After World War II ended, Charles F. Rauch, Jr., a recently commissioned Navy officer, reported to the cruiser *Huntington* and discovered that the Navy was indeed integrating its enlisted ranks. The crew of the *Huntington* included African American petty officers who did

²¹⁴ Ibid.

not prepare or serve food. Although the African American and Filipino stewards formed a distinct servant class, Rauch saw these African American seamen simply as members of the *Huntington's* crew. But Rauch was naïve, for he did not realize that African American sailors were still encountering stiff resistance to integration by some of their white shipmates.²¹⁵

The major concern of civil rights groups in the postwar period was not the number of African Americans in the regular Navy but that the majority of African Americans were still being accepted for duty in the non-white Steward's Branch. More than 97% of all African American sailors in the regular Navy were in this branch in December of 1945. This number improved slightly in the next six months, when 3,000 African American general service personnel (out of a wartime high of 90,000) transferred into the Regular Navy, while more than 10,000 African American reservists and draftees joined the 7,000 regulars already in the Steward's Branch.²¹⁶ The low point in terms of the ratio of African Americans in the postwar regular general service and the Steward's Branch occurred in 1947, when only 19.21% of the Navy's regular African American personnel were assigned outside the Steward's Branch. In short, more than eight out of every ten African Americans in the Navy trained and worked separately from whites, performed menial tasks, and were led by African American non-commissioned officers who were denied the advantages of rank.²¹⁷

The Bureau of Naval Personnel was unhappy with the problems associated with the Steward's Branch because it created huge efficiency problems and was bad for the Navy's

²¹⁵ Bernard C. Nalty, "Long Passage to Korea: Black Sailors and the Integration of the U.S. Navy," Department of the Navy, Washington DC, 2003, pp. 25-26.

²¹⁶ Memo, Director of Planning and Control, BuPers, for Chief, NavPers (ca. Jan 46), subject: Negro Personnel, Pers 21 B, BuPersRecs.

²¹⁷ BuPers, Memo on Discrimination of the Negro, January 24, 1959, BuPers Technical Library.

image. Because of low standards, the Steward's Branch attracted the poorly educated and the underprivileged, who possessed a high rate of venereal disease. After all, these men were the primary handlers of food and were often the custodians of the personal gear of the officers and the crew. Leaders within the Steward's Branch were often below standard as well. Relations between stewards and the unit to which they were assigned were often marked by personal conflicts. Moreover, while stewards eagerly joined the Steward's Branch in the regular Navy, there were many disciplinary problems among them. It was only a matter of time before civil rights groups got involved. They were upset with the idea of a separate branch for minorities but they were also concerned with the unfavorable image of African Americans in the Navy that these men created.

The Steward Branch performed a number of essential functions, especially at sea. Since this function was limited in scope, the Navy was able to reduce the standards for it; thus opening opportunities for many who before could not enlist. To offer a chance for advancement, the Navy had to create a separate recruiting and training system for stewards. This separation explained the stewards' usual failure to transfer to branches in the regular command channels. Since there were no minimum standards for the Steward's Branch, most of its noncommissioned officers remained unqualified to exercise military command over personnel other than those in the Steward's Branch. Lack of command responsibility was also present in a number of branches not directly concerned with the operation of ships. This was not caused by race prejudice, the Navy insisted, but by the standards for enlistment and the types of duties performed.

The frequent physical separation of the stewards, the Navy's argument continued, was not based on race either; berthing was arranged by department and function aboard large vessels.

Separation did not exist on smaller vessels. Messmen were usually berthed with other men of the supply department, including bakers and storekeepers. Chief stewards had not been required to meet the military qualifications for chief petty officer, so they would not be given the same privileges reserved for the highest enlisted grade of the U.S. Navy. Stewards of the lower ranks received the same chance for advancement as members of other enlisted branches, but to grant them opportunities to command would necessitate raising the qualifications for the whole Steward's Branch, thus eliminating many career stewards and extending steward training to include purely military subjects. ²¹⁸

There was truth in some of the Navy's assertions. Stewards had taken advantage of relaxed regulations, flocking into the regular Navy during the first months of the changeover program. Many did so because they had many years invested in the navy. Some may have wanted the training and experience to be gained from service as a messman. In fact, many stewards went on to careers in the restaurant, club, and hotel industry after they retired. The Steward's Branch consistently reported the highest reenlistment rate in the Navy, and the stewards themselves provided a major stumbling block to reform the Steward's Branch. Few senior men aspired to other ratings and many were reluctant to relinquish what they saw as the advantages of the messman's life. ²¹⁹ The Steward's Branch was open to all, but it remained nonwhite. There were six times as many illiterate whites as African Americans in the Navy, yet none of them were assigned to the Steward's Branch, and none transferred to it until after World

²¹⁸ Letter, Acting SecNav to Lester Granger, April 22, 1946, QN/MM (2) and Letter, Under SecNav to Congressman Clyde Doyle of California, August 24, 1949; both in GenRecsNav.

²¹⁹ MacGregor, "Integration of the Armed Forces, 1940-1965," p. 241.

War II. ²²⁰

Moreover, shortly after the war, the Bureau of Naval Personnel predicted a 7,577-man shortage in the Steward's Branch but the bureau made no attempt to fill these openings with whites. Instead, the Navy enlisted Filipinos and Guamanians into the Steward's Branch, recruiting 3,500 of the islanders before the program was stopped by recruiters on July 4, 1946, the date of Philippine independence. Navy recruiters found other ways to fill steward quotas. The Urban League and others reported cases in which African American volunteers were rejected by recruiters for any assignment but steward duty. Nor did civil rights spokesmen appreciate the distinction in petty officer rank the Navy made between the steward and other sailors; they continued to interpret it as part and parcel of the "injustices, lack of respect and the disregard for the privileges accorded rated men in other branches of the service." They also resented the paternalism implicit in the secretary's assurances that messman's duty was a haven for men unable to compete. ²²¹

Many individuals in the Navy Department were aware of the growing resentment of the African American community, and they pushed for the reforming of the Steward's Branch. For example, Secretary of the Navy for Air, John Nicholas Brown, wanted more publicity in and outside the service saying that the Steward's Branch was not restricted to only one race and that African Americans were welcome in the general service. ²²²

²²⁰ Letter, Director, Plans and Operations Division, BuPers, to Richard Lueking, Berea College, December 6, 1946, P16.1, BuPersRecs.

²²¹ Memo, Lieutenant Dennis D. Nelson, office of Public Relations, for Captain E.B. Dexter, Office of Public Relations, August 24, 1948, subject: Negro Stewards, Petty Officer Ratings, Status of, PR 221-14003, GenRecsNav.

²²² Letter, Assistant Secretary of the Navy to Lester Granger, April 22, 1948, QN-MM (2), GenRecsNav.

Lester Granger also pleaded for a merger of the commissary and steward functions. Since members of the Commissary Branch could advance to true petty officer rating, such a merger would provide a new avenue of advancement for stewards. Granger also pushed for reform in the standards of the Steward's Branch. He recognized that educational and other requirements had been lowered for stewards, but he told Forrestal's successor, Secretary John L. Sullivan, there was little wisdom in "compounding past error." He also pointed out that not all messmen were in the lower intelligence classifications and recommended that the higher scoring men be replaced with low-scoring whites. ²²³

Lieutenant Dennis D. Nelson, one of the first twelve African Americans commissioned and still on active duty after World War II, was especially concerned with the status of the stewards. Nelson was a friend of Secretary Sullivan's and, though not primarily assigned to the task, made equal opportunity his number one concern. A highly visible member of the Navy's racial minority in Washington, Nelson made himself its spokesman, pressing senior officials to bring the department's manpower practices closer to its stated policy.

Nelson had a multitude of suggestions for the Steward's Branch: eliminate the Stewards' Branch as a racially separate division of labor, provide permanent officer supervisions for all steward units, develop capable noncommissioned officers in the branch with privileges and responsibilities similar to those of other petty officers, indoctrinate all personnel in the ramifications of the Navy's stated integration policy, and create a committee to work out the details of these changes. ²²⁴

²²³ Letter, Granger to SecNav, March 15, 1948, SO-3-18-56, SecNav files, GenRecsNav.

²²⁴ Memorandum, Lieutenant Dennis D. Nelson to Rear Admiral R.F. Hickey, deputy director, Office of Public Relations, March 26, 1948, subject: Problems of the stewards' branch, Navy and Old Army Branch, National Archives, Washington, DC.

On several occasions Nelson tried to show his superiors how their own behavior towards the stewards reinforced discrimination. He recommended that the steward's uniform be changed, eliminating the white jacket and giving the steward a regular sailor's look. He also suggested that petty officer uniforms for stewards be regularized. He also tried to change a thoughtless habit that demeaned both African Americans and whites:

Refrain from the use of 'Boy' in addressing Stewards. This has been a constant practice in the Service and is most objectionable, is in bad taste, shows undue familiarity and pins on a badge of inferiority, adding little to the dignity and pride of adults. ²²⁵

In summing up his recommendations for the Secretary of the Navy in January of 1949, Nelson reminded Sullivan that only 37% of the Navy's African Americans were in the general service, in contrast to 72% of the African Americans in the Marine Corps. He warned that this imbalance perturbed the members of the recently convened National Defense Conference on Negro Affairs and predicted it would interest those involved in the forthcoming presidential inquiry on quality in the armed forces. ²²⁶

Despite its defense of the *status quo* in the Steward's Branch, the Bureau of Naval Personnel was not insensitive to criticism. In October 1945 the Bureau had announced that any African American in the general service who desired a transfer to the Steward's Branch had to do so in writing. ²²⁷ In June of 1946 the Bureau of Naval Personnel closed the Steward's Branch to new enlistments, thereby eliminating possible abuses in the recruiting system. Later in 1946, the Bureau of Naval Personnel tried to upgrade the quality of the steward's branch by instituting a

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Letter, Nelson to SecNav, January 7, 1949, SecNav files, GenRecsNav.

²²⁷ BuPers Cir Letter, October 17, 1945.

new and more rigorous training course for second- and third-class stewards and cooks at Bainbridge, Maryland. Finally in June 1947, it removed from its personnel manual all remaining mention of restrictions on the transfer of messmen to the general service.²²⁸

The changes made by the Bureau of Naval Personnel were important, but they failed to address the major problem of the Steward's Branch: racial separation. Thus the controversy over messmen went on, and the Steward's Branch, a symbol of discrimination in the U.S. Navy, remained to trouble both the Navy and civil rights organizations.

A paucity of African American officers in the postwar period also reminded reformers that the U.S. Navy was failing to live up to its promises of integration. After World War II, the number of African American officers declined dramatically. From a wartime peak of sixty, the number of African American officers dwindled to just three by the end of 1946, all of them reservists on extended active duty.

It was not until 1947 that Ensign John Lee, who was commissioned in the reserves from the V-12 program, a program initiated by the Navy during World War II to combine college education and officers training, became the first African American officer in the regular Navy. As Lee described it, his selection for a regular commission resulted from being in the right place at the right time.²²⁹ In 1947 there was not even one African American regular officer; the only African American midshipman at the Naval Academy, Wesley A. Brown, was two years away from graduating. Moreover, almost all of the African American reserve officers commissioned during World War II had left the service. One of the three African American men on active duty

²²⁸ Change 12 to Article D-5114, BuPers Manual, 1942.

²²⁹ Bernard C. Nalty, *Long Passage to Korea: Black Sailors and the Integration of the U.S. Navy*, Naval Historical Center, Department of the Navy, Washington, DC, 2003, p.27.

during 1946, Lieutenant (jg) Samuel L. Gravely, had just left; he was convinced that opportunities for an African American officer were limited. The remaining two reservists available for a place in the regular Navy were Lieutenant (jg) Dennis D. Nelson and Ensign John Wesley Lee. The Bureau of Naval Personnel considered Nelson too old at age forty to receive a regular commission, but Lee was in his mid-twenties. Lee realized that he needed more training and duty at sea to complete a successful career in the Navy. The Director of Officer Personnel, Captain Roland N. Smoot, agreed and sent Ensign Lee to the General Line School at Newport, Rhode Island, followed by an assignment to the aircraft carrier *Kearsarge*.

Various obstacles hampered the efforts to increase the number of African American officers. Those commissioned in the reserves during World War II tended to be older than the typical newly commissioned ensign of that time. Thus, they were older than most officers in the same pay grade, and the Navy emphasized the retention of the younger officers. Moreover, the size of the Navy's officer candidate program shrunk after the war. The Naval Reserve Officer Training Corps (NROTC) at various institutions of higher learning became the normal source for reserve officers. Between 1946 and 1948 only sixteen African Americans completed officer candidate school, and only fourteen African Americans graduated from NROTC programs, the latter the usual avenue to obtain a Regular Navy commission.²³⁰

The Navy also banned traditionally African American institutions of higher education from the wartime V-12 officer training program, and this ban continued to apply to the postwar NROTC. Every institution of higher learning that participated in officer training agreed to accept anyone who had earned an NROTC scholarship in a competitive examination, but some

²³⁰ "BuPers Narrative," 1: 295.

ignored the pledge because of state law, local tradition, or school policy. As a result, African Americans who qualified for the NROTC program had to find a school that would accept them. An easy solution to this problem would have been to place African American institutions on the list of schools offering NROTC training. The Navy did not establish an NROTC unit at a traditionally African American institution until it did so at Prairie View A&M in Texas in 1965.

Efforts by African American reserve officers to obtain NROTC applicants in African American high schools, colleges, and universities continued to prove unsuccessful. Lieutenant Dennis D. Nelson spoke to 8,500 potential candidates in 1948, and a special recruiting team talked to an equal number in 1949, but these efforts brought fewer than ninety African American applicants to take the examination.²³¹

Recruiters were having problems enlisting African Americans for the Navy's general service as well. Even the complaints and demands of African American citizens about the Navy's racist ways now merely trickled into the secretary's office, reflecting a growing indifference. That such unwillingness to enlist, as Lester Granger put it, should occur on the heels of a widely publicized promise of racial equality in the Navy was ironic. The Navy was willing to accept African Americans but African Americans no longer seemed interested in joining the U.S. Navy.²³²

Assistant Secretary of the Navy Brown pointed to the gap between policy and practice. Because of the delays in abolishing discrimination in the Navy, Assistant Secretary Brown felt

²³¹ Memo, Director, Political Division, BuPers, for Captain William C. Chapman, Office of Information, Navy Department, September 21, 1965; Memo, Chief, NavPers, for Chief, Bureau of Public Relations, December 16, 1948, QR4; both in BuPersRecs.

²³² See Testimony of Lester Granger and Assistant Secretary Brown at National Defense Conference on Negro Affairs, 26 April 1948, morning session, pp.45-46; and Memo, Nelson for Marx Leva, 24 May 1948, copy in Nelson Archives.

that the Navy's public relations were also in danger.²³³ The Bureau of Personnel investigated, found justification for complaints of discrimination, and took corrective action. But, such corrections, as Lieutenant Nelson pointed out, were usually directed to specific commanders and tied to specific incidents and were ignored by other commanders as inapplicable to their own racial experiences.²³⁴ Despite the existence of the racially separate Steward's Branch, the Navy's policy seemed so unassailable to the Chief of Naval Personnel that when his views on a congressional measure to abolish segregation in the services were solicited he reported without reservation that his bureau offered no objection.²³⁵

The Navy's major racial problem by 1948 was the shockingly small percentage of African Americans in the general service. In 1948, African Americans accounted for 4.3% of the Navy's strength. Not only were there few African Americans in the U.S. Navy, there were too few of them in the general service and practically no African American officers. The Navy refused to lower recruitment standards, stating that it could not run its ships and planes with men who scored low on their classification tests. Their solution was to recruit among the increasing numbers of educated African Americans, as the Personnel Bureau was trying to do. But here, as Nelson and others could report, the Navy faced severe competition from other employers, and here the Navy's public image had its strongest effect.

Lieutenant Commander Edward Hope, an African American reserve officer assigned to officer procurement, concluded that the African American community, including veterans,

²³³ Memorandum, Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Air for Dep. CNO, February 3, 1948, subject: Racial Discrimination, P1-4 (8), GenRecsNav.

²³⁴ Memo, Nelson for Chief, NavPers, November 29, 1948, sub: Complaint of Navy Enlisted Man Made to *Pittsburgh Courier*..., PR 221, BuPersRecs.

²³⁵ Memo, Chief, NavPers, for JAG, February 11, 1947, sub: HR 279: To Prohibit Race Segregation in the Armed Forces of the United States, GenRecsNav.

distrusted all the services. Consequently, African Americans tended to disregard announced plans and policies applicable to all citizens unless they were specially labeled “for colored.” African Americans avoided applying for certain rights or benefits knowing that they would be arbitrarily rejected. Adding to these suspicions, Hope reported, was a genuine lack of information on Navy policy. This seriously limited the number of African American applicants.²³⁶

It was easy to see why African American students were confused. The memories of the frustrations and insults suffered by African American seamen during World War II were fresh in their minds. African Americans, according to Lester Granger, also remembered the labor battalions “bossed” by whites, which seemed to them much like the old plantation system. Unlike the U.S. Army, the U.S. Navy had offered very few African American enlisted men the chance to serve important roles under African American commanders. This, according to Granger, robbed the African American sailor of pride in service, a pride that could hardly be restored by the postwar image of the African American sailor not as a fighting man but as a servant or laborer. Granger was anxious to improve the Navy’s image in the African American community, and he and others often advanced plans for doing so.²³⁷

After World War II, disinterest in the naval service among the African American community was not a major concern of the U.S. Navy. Indeed, for many military traditionalists, this was a perfect situation. Armed against critics with a strong integration policy that

²³⁶ Letter, Lieutenant Commander, E.S. Hope to Secretary of Defense, May 17, 1948, with attached report D54-1-10, GenRecsNav.

²³⁷ Letter, Granger to SecNav, June 10, 1947, 54-1-13, Forrestal file, GenRecsNav, and Granger’s comments and questions at the National Defense Conference on Negro Affairs, April 26, 1948.

nevertheless managed to keep African American enlistment to low levels, they could enjoy a Navy little different from the one that existed before World War II.

But, the lack of African American volunteers for general service was soon to become a major problem for the Navy. With public attention stirred up by a presidential commission, the period spanning 1950-1965 would become a turbulent one for the Navy in matters of race relations. Ironically, the Navy was the first service to have a policy of integration, but it would soon find itself running behind in the race to attract African Americans and other American minorities.

The conflict that pitted the United States against the Soviet Union, also known as the “Cold War,” intensified in 1948 when the Soviet Union prohibited access to Berlin in occupied Germany and took other hostile actions around the globe. If an actual war broke out, then the U.S. would need to use all of its manpower resources. Specifically, the United States could no longer assign African Americans to non-essential tasks, in effect ignoring the potential skills of one citizen in ten merely to maintain racial segregation. Further, segregation damaged the reputation of the United States abroad as the champion of the Free World. It also specifically offended African nations who held important strategic resources, such as oil fields and uranium deposits.

Crucial to continuing the momentum of the Navy’s integration movement was Harry S. Truman. Despite growing up in racially segregated Missouri, Truman believed, while still a senator, that African Americans should enjoy the basic rights guaranteed to all citizens. A series of brutal acts perpetrated against African American soldiers in the South during the immediate postwar period seemed to strengthen his resolve.

In December of 1946, President Truman appointed the President's Committee on Civil Rights. Its report, issued on October 29, 1947, condemned segregation and recommended legislative and administrative action to end immediately all forms of discrimination and segregation based on race, color, creed, or national origin in all branches of the American armed services.

The election of 1948 was quickly approaching and President Truman needed the political support of African Americans and those in the Democratic Party who favored racial tolerance. Politics thus influenced his actions, though he personally opposed racism as well. On July 26, 1948 President Truman issued Executive Order 9981, which established a policy of "equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion, or national origin."²³⁸

President Truman seemed to take the announced policy seriously, for the executive order also created an advisory committee to examine the response to the directive and to make recommendations to the commander in chief. When asked during a press conference if the executive order meant "eventually the end of segregation," Truman answered, "Yes."²³⁹

Captain Herbert D. Riley, a naval officer on the staff of James Forrestal, now Secretary of Defense, warned that the racial integration of officer's clubs and wardrooms might result in mass resignations and early retirements. Riley even raised the possibility of mutiny. Assistant Secretary of the Navy (Air) John Nicholas Brown advised Forrestal in December of 1948 that, as a result of existing policies that fostered integration, most white officers and

²³⁸ Executive Order 9981, 26 July 1948, Harry S. Truman Library, Independence Missouri.

²³⁹ President's News Conference of July 29 1948, *Public Papers of the Presidents, 1948*, Government Printing Office, Washington, DC.

enlisted men had come to accept the principle of equal treatment and opportunity regardless of race. Moreover, African Americans were already serving in a variety of duties on board ship and ashore where they berthed and worked alongside whites.²⁴⁰

Problems still remained, especially with the continuing heavy concentration of African Americans in the Steward's Branch. By suspending the recruiting of African Americans to the Steward's Branch, the Bureau of Naval Personnel hoped to improve the racial balance in the Steward's Branch.

President Truman wasted no time in appointing the committee called for in Executive Order 9981, and on September 18, 1948, he announced the names of the members of the President's committee. Truman and his advisors concluded that a committee dealing with so sensitive an issue as race relations had to have a white chairman. The President insisted on someone who was sympathetic to the aspirations of African Americans and could express his views in a way that did not grate on the ears of white Southerners. He chose attorney and former Solicitor General of the United States Charles Fahy, a Georgia-born Catholic who had held many posts in Democratic administrations since the 1930s and who was a known liberal in issues of race. The Fahy Committee, consisting of five whites and two African Americans, met for the first time in January 1949.

The Fahy Committee reviewed the U.S. Navy's program for providing equal treatment and opportunity to African Americans. Although the committee found little to criticize in the new policy of the Navy with respect to training and assignment, it was concerned that the opportunities that the Navy offered had not attracted a larger number of African Americans for

²⁴⁰ Bernard C. Nalty, *Long Passage to Korea: Black Sailors and the Integration of the U.S. Navy*, Naval Historical Center, Department of the Navy, Washington, DC, 2003, p.29. Cited hereafter as "Nalty."

the general service. As of January 1, 1950, the African American enlisted strength was 15,747 out of a total of 330,098, or 4.7%. Of this total 6,647 were in general ratings and 9,110 in the messman's branch. The percentage of African Americans in general ratings was exactly 2%.²⁴¹

The Fahy Committee wondered why so few African Americans served in the Navy, and why so many of those who did serve were still stewards. The Chief of Naval Personnel, Vice Admiral William Fechteler replied that African Americans were not a seafaring people. Fechteler thought he had answered both questions, but his explanation did not satisfy the committee. Nor did the information that there were a number of African Americans training at Naval Reserve Facilities and that Jesse Brown was undergoing carrier qualification.

The Fahy Committee believed that the small number of African Americans in the general service could be partly attributed to a long memory of the U.S. Navy's earlier restrictive policy and to a general unawareness among African Americans that this policy had been discarded. Since the impression seemed to prevail that the U.S. Navy lagged behind the other two services, the Fahy Committee believed the U.S. Navy should correct this impression.²⁴²

The Fahy Committee was also dissatisfied with the small number of African American officers in the U.S. Navy. In 1942, two African Americans entered Harvard Medical School under the U.S. Navy's officer training program. The following year the Navy opened its V-12 program to African Americans but since few African Americans were enrolled in colleges offering V-12 training, only a small number of African Americans could take advantage of the program. Finally, in February of 1944, the U.S. Navy selected twenty-two African American candidates for commissions in the Naval Reserve. Of these, twelve were appointed as staff

²⁴¹ *Freedom to Serve: Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services*, Modern Military Records Branch, National Archives, Washington, DC.

²⁴² *Ibid.*

officers with the rank of ensign or lieutenant junior grade and assigned to the chaplain, dental, medical, civil engineer, and supply corps. ²⁴³

By the time World War Two ended, the V-12 program had raised the number of African American officers to fifty-eight. A few of these men saw action on auxiliary vessels, but most were assigned as recruiters and technical school instructors. Later in the war, some of them were assigned by the Navy to command stevedore units in the Pacific. ²⁴⁴

After VJ-day, almost all of the African American officers applied for demobilization and discharge; their wartime experiences convinced them that they had no future in the U.S. Navy. When the Fahy Committee began its work early in 1949, there were only four African American officers still on active duty. On January 1, 1950, because of the work done by the Fahy Committee, there were seventeen African American officers on active duty, including two WAVE officers. Of these, eight were regular officers, and nine were in the reserve. ²⁴⁵

The two principal sources of naval officers at that time were Annapolis and the Naval Reserve Officers Training Corps, also called the Holloway program. When the Holloway program became fully operative, the U.S. Navy would subsidize in part the college education of 15,000 students each year in fifty-five colleges and universities. In 1950, there were two African Americans attending Annapolis, and nine African Americans were in the Holloway program. There were also twelve African American college students training in the Reserve Officer Corps. ²⁴⁶

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

The Fahy Committee also found that a small number of African Americans were participating in the Holloway program. The Committee knew that competition for the Holloway scholarships was often rigorous, and African American applicants, often burdened by inferior schooling, did not do well. The Fahy Committee thought that the Navy should promote the lack of racial restrictions on Holloway scholarships and on naval officer commissions among the African American community.²⁴⁷

While the committee was satisfied that African Americans in the general service were enjoying equal treatment and opportunities, it did find evidence that African Americans were still being discriminated against in the Steward's Branch. The Committee learned that chief stewards in the U.S. Navy received the same pay and the perquisites, but not the grade, of chief petty officer. The same was also true for first-, second-, and third-class stewards.²⁴⁸

In the spring of 1949, as the Fahy Committee continued to deliberate, Ensign Wesley A. Brown became the first African American to graduate from the United States Naval Academy. A native of Washington, D.C., Brown had received his appointment to the Naval Academy thanks to Representative Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., an African American whose congressional district in New York included Harlem, a huge African American enclave.

Other African Americans, including George Trivers, who entered the Academy in 1937, had failed to graduate. Overwhelmed by hazing and forced isolation, Trivers, like African Americans before him, chose to earn his degree elsewhere. Trivers talked to Brown about some of the important customs at Annapolis but he also spoke to Brown about the incessant hazing.

²⁴⁷ Morris J. MacGregor, Jr., *Integration of the Armed Forces 1940-1965*, (Washington, D.C., Center of Military History, 1989), p.246.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

After speaking with Trivers, Brown feared the worst. But Brown's experiences at Annapolis proved less stressful than expected. Unlike many of George Trivers's hostile classmates of the 1930s, most of Brown's classmates ignored him. But some were actually kind to him and two or three even offered to room with him. Brown chose to live alone, however, for he was concerned that a white roommate might face some sort of retaliation. During his time at Annapolis, Brown discovered that not every Northerner was liberal on racial matters, nor was every Southerner a bigot.²⁴⁹

Representative Powell, who frequently questioned the Navy's commitment to equal treatment and opportunity, insisted that Brown receive fair treatment. When Powell complained to Secretary Forrestal of a rumored plot to grade Brown more stringently than white midshipmen, Forrestal forwarded the complaint to Vice Admiral Aubrey W. Fitch, Superintendent of Annapolis. Confident that Powell had invented this story to pressure the Navy to integrate, Fitch questioned Brown. Brown's surprised reaction not only validated Fitch's belief but also revealed that Brown was not a party to Representative Powell's plan. Brown's graduation in 1949 may have broken the racial barrier at the United States Naval Academy, but it took another four years for another African American, Lawrence Chambers, to receive a commission.²⁵⁰

In May of 1949, the Fahy Committee made several recommendations concerning racial matters in the Navy. First, the Navy should launch a vigorous campaign to recruit African Americans for both the general service and the NROTC. Second, the Navy should treat chief stewards like chief petty officers in all other specialties. In addition, the Navy should require the

²⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 114.

²⁵⁰ Nalty, p. 32.

same intelligence test scores of recruits by the other services, instead of demanding higher test standards.²⁵¹

Senior officers of the Bureau of Personnel objected to making the chief steward a peer of the chief petty officer and warned that uniform test scores for all the services might mean lower scores for enlistment in the U.S. Navy. Under Secretary of the Navy Dan A. Kimball, however, accepted the spirit if not the letter of the Fahy Committee's recommendations. He increased the recruiting of African Americans, pledged that the Marine Corps would integrate recruit training as the Navy had done since 1945, agreed to enhance the status of chief stewards, and promised to conduct a study of possible assignments for recruits with lower test scores. The Fahy Committee endorsed Kimball's plan, which Secretary of Defense Louis D. Johnson, who had replaced Forrestal in March, formally announced on June 7, 1949.

In August of 1949, representatives of the Fahy Committee traveled to the Great Lakes Naval Training Station near Chicago. There they visited the technical training schools, which provided instruction in electronics, communications, and other demanding subjects. The Committee reported that Great Lakes was "unquestionably following the policy of the Navy." Their visit revealed "no segregation in either boot training or in the service schools." Clearly, "Negroes who are in the schools are there because they meet the qualifications of a particular rating. And meeting these qualifications, they elicit the respect which craftsmanship deserves."²⁵²

The Fahy Committee thus ratified the Navy's efforts to achieve equal treatment and opportunity for all races. But the problem of social integration still remained. Many in the Navy

²⁵¹ *Freedom to Serve: Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services*, Modern Military Records Branch, National Archives, Washington, DC.

²⁵² *Ibid.*

believed that personal relationships in the Navy's enlisted force were developing with minimum obstructions. When problems did arise, such as racial segregation at barber shops and swimming pools, the Navy invoked a directive of June 23, 1949, which sought to achieve the goal of President Truman's policy by prohibiting "special or unusual provisions" in housing, messing, berthing, or other facilities "for the accommodation of any minority race."²⁵³

Most racial problems occurred in the southern United States, where a military installation could be like a "racially integrated island floating in a sea of segregation." Despite the local laws and customs, by June 1950, the U.S. Navy had integrated recreational and other facilities at bases in Jacksonville and Pensacola, Florida and Corpus Christi, Texas.

The African American press was enlisted by Lieutenant Dennis Nelson to help promote and encourage the aims of the integrated U.S. Navy. He also convinced his superiors to include African American journalists among those invited to join cruises that were meant to impress influential civilians. During the summer cruises of 1949 and 1950, African American journalists sailed on board the battleship *Missouri* to report on the Navy's progress with integrating its crews. One of these African American reporters, Lucius Harper of the *Chicago Defender*, discovered that some of the African American crewmen of the *Missouri* were operating or learning to operate radar, manning gun turrets, or performing mechanical or engineering duties. He admitted that racial integration was not perfect. All one had to do was look at the Steward Branch, which was composed mostly of African Americans. But, Harper believed the stewards could be integrated racially through examinations and promotions.

It was clear that the Navy was committed to equal treatment, but racial discrimination still existed. The Navy often encountered problems with civilians when it insisted on the racial

²⁵³ Nelson, *The Integration of the Negro into the Navy*, p. 223.

integration of community-sponsored events for its officers and enlisted men. For example, in the spring of 1950, at Charleston, South Carolina, the captain of the aircraft carrier *Saipan* cooperated with the whites-only YMCA to hold a party on board the ship. African American crewmen were not specifically excluded, and some actually attended the event. But on the next evening, the white YMCA and its African American counterpart staged a separate party for the *Saipan*'s African American crewmen in the segregated city of Charleston. The captain of the *Saipan* played no part in planning the second event but he accepted the invitation on behalf of his crew.

Upon learning of these racially segregated parties, Secretary of the Navy Francis P. Matthews ordered an investigation. Based on this investigation, Secretary Matthews decided that the captain of the *Saipan* did not knowingly sanction the racially segregated party, but he warned all commanding officers to avoid segregated events like the ones that took place at Charleston. Secretary Matthews also said that the U.S. Navy would not officially endorse, promote, or fund such racially segregated activities.

The new racial policy of the U.S. Navy underwent another test in the summer of 1950 on board the battleship *Missouri* while it was moored at the city of Halifax in the Canadian province of Nova Scotia. The *Missouri*'s officers accepted assurances by a liaison officer from the Royal Canadian Navy that no color line existed at Halifax. The local Colored Citizens Improvement League invited the *Missouri*'s African American sailors to a party. The *Missouri*'s captain assumed that this party would take place in addition to a similar event for the entire crew and he promptly accepted on behalf of the African American crewmen. But the *Missouri*'s captain was wrong. The sponsors at Halifax were planning two separate parties, one for whites and one for African Americans.

Once again, Secretary Matthews ordered an investigation. After considering the evidence, he concluded that the *Missouri* had an excellent record in its efforts to achieve full integration, and he was sure that the segregation of the African American crewmen at Halifax was not done intentionally. But he did warn that incidents like that at Halifax must not happen again.

Lester Granger underscored the Navy's determination to put an end to segregated social events. He contacted the president of the Halifax Colored Citizens Improvement League and told him that the Navy could not insist upon eliminating racial separation aboard the ships of its fleets and at the same time accept invitations that restricted its African American servicemen.

When the Korean War broke out in June of 1950, Secretary of the Navy Matthews was systematically carrying out the reforms that Under Secretary Kimball had accepted to satisfy the Fahy Committee. In July of 1949 Secretary Matthews issued an order banning discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, or national origin in the enlistment, appointment, promotion, or assignment of Navy or Marine Corps personnel. On July 25, 1949, chief stewards became chief petty officers. Stewards first, second, and third class, however, remained in a sort of organizational limbo. Not until August of 1949 did the Bureau of Naval Personnel designate the lower ranking stewards as petty officers in their appropriate grades.

A general perception existed in the Navy that stewards were not real sailors and this idea delayed the full acceptance of senior stewards as genuine petty officers. For example, in the fall of 1950 *All Hands* printed a patronizing account of the work of some stewards at the Naval Air Station, Atlantic City, New Jersey. When they were off duty, many of these stewards tended gardens which yielded a crop of vegetables that would have cost the Navy at least \$1,000.00 to purchase from local farms. This accomplishment, however, remained buried amid the cuteness

of a story that began: “Now that the frost is on the pumpkin and ruin reigns for the potato patch, the wardroom folks...sometimes sit back and reflect on the success of their 1950 garden plot.” Although the headline referred to the stewards as “Men of the Sea,” readers could not help but conclude that the stewards preferred “the memory of roasting ears and fresh green cucumbers” to the perils of the deep.²⁵⁴

During the Korean War, the U.S. Navy increased its efforts to appeal to African Americans by sending recruiters to speak to African American high school students. After the number of African American enlisted personnel declined from 17,051 in 1949 to 14,858 in 1950, the number of African American enlisted reached 17,604 in 1951 and climbed to 24,734 by the end of the Korean War in July of 1953. Thus, since the establishment of the Fahy Committee in 1949, African American enlisted strength in the U.S. Navy increased by almost 7,000 men. Equally encouraging was that 2,700 African Americans applied during 1949 to enter NROTC, either by competing for scholarships or by joining units at colleges where they were enrolled.²⁵⁵

When African American officers, many who had served as recruiters, went to sea, they tended to be assigned by the Navy as assistant communications officers. Over the years, African American officers were often first assigned to recruiting duty for one or two tours and then to an auxiliary vessel where they might take charge of the radio shack. But, assignments like these did not enhance the officer’s chances for promotion.

One of the African American officers appointed by Lieutenant Nelson for recruiting duty was Lieutenant Samuel L. Gravely. He proceeded from recruiting duty to communications school and then to an assistant communications billet, though on board the battleship *Iowa* rather

²⁵⁴ *All Hands: The Bureau of Naval Personnel Information Bulletin*, Autumn 1950.

²⁵⁵ BuPers, Personnel Statistics Branch. See BuPers, “Memo on Discrimination of the Negro,” January 24, 1959, BAF2-014. BuPers Technical Library.

than an auxiliary vessel. He was serving on the *Iowa* when she shelled targets in North Korea. Gravely assumed that he had been selected for communications duty on the *Iowa* because he had been the communications officer on the submarine chaser *PC 1264* during World War II. But, he soon realized that “the Navy really didn’t pick its best people” for this assignment.²⁵⁶ Gravely was determined however to succeed in the U.S. Navy. He earned a regular commission and made a successful career for himself in surface warfare, taking command of the destroyer escort *Falgout* in 1961. On April 28, 1971, in recognition of Gravely’s superior leadership skills, the U.S. Navy selected him for flag rank, making him the first African American to become an admiral.

Lieutenant John Wesley Lee, the first African American to earn a commission in the regular Navy, served on the cruiser *Toledo* during the Korean conflict as an assistant communications officer. The *Toledo* participated in the bombardment of enemy forces during the successful amphibious assault at Inchon.

Meanwhile, the Marine Corps was starting to realize that it needed skilled men, no matter what their race, to fight the difficult war in Korea. As a result, on December 13, 1951, the Marine Corps issued a memorandum directing subordinate commands to fill all billets with qualified Marines of all races.

The U.S. Navy’s fight to end racial discrimination also proceeded on the home front during the Korean War. In one example, a group in Washington D.C., which had previously sponsored social events for servicemen and government employees, arranged a cruise on the Potomac for whites only. Learning of the group’s insistence on segregation, local naval

²⁵⁶ Bernard C. Nalty, *Long Passage to Korea: Black Sailors and the Integration of the U.S. Navy*, (Washington, D.C.: Naval Historical Center, 2003), p. 37.

commanders removed notices posted on government property advertising the Potomac cruise and pulled passes that would have allowed white sailors to attend. Declining the invitation showed that the Department of Defense officially disapproved of racially segregated activities. On November 10, 1950, the Navy's Chief of Information issued a letter of instruction advising all commanders that they should avoid participating in or sponsoring any event that was racially discriminatory in nature.

Late in 1950, Clarence Mitchell, Jr., director of the Washington Bureau of the National Association of Colored People (NAACP), proposed two measures to further equal treatment and opportunity within the Navy. First, the NAACP wanted the Navy to stop using the standard racial identifiers ("Caucasian," "Mongolian," "Negroid," etc.) in naval personnel files. Second, the NAACP wanted to stop the racially segregated housing and messing of recruits while new sailors awaited transportation to a naval installation.

Although a strong advocate of equal opportunity, Secretary of the Navy Matthews rejected Mitchell's suggestions. In some cities, especially but not exclusively in the South, there were no public accommodations that would serve whites and African American equally. Unless a military installation was nearby, the Navy sometimes had to sign separate contracts to house and feed white and African American recruits. As for the racial identifiers, Matthews believed that this information was necessary to administer the program of racial integration and to evaluate its effectiveness.

As the U.S. Navy struggled with segregation on the home front during the Korean War, L. Alex Wilson, a correspondent for the *Chicago Defender*, studied the state of racial integration within the U.S. naval forces fighting in Korea. The African Americans whom Wilson interviewed believed that the U.S. Navy was truly committed to integration and that their

treatment was improving. According to them, race relations seemed to be better at sea than in port, for when they were ashore, alcohol tended to dissolve personal inhibitions and break the bonds of naval discipline. Despite the occasional alcohol-induced fight, a large number of whites proved willing to associate with African Americans and supported equal treatment and opportunity.²⁵⁷

The whites whom Wilson interviewed fell into two groups. A “fair percentage” accepted racial integration, and a minority felt that African American sailors were receiving unfair preferential treatment. Wilson believed that persuading the last group to accept, if not embrace, equal treatment and opportunity, required help from officers and petty officers. According to Wilson’s data, not every naval officer shared this commitment to equal treatment and opportunity, but even those who did not realized that they had to go along with the Navy policy for the sake of their careers.²⁵⁸

Collins George of the *Pittsburgh Courier* was much less optimistic than Wilson. In May of 1951, he described a discouraging state of affairs at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, and the adjacent town of Jacksonville. African American families, George wrote, lived in quarters inferior to those assigned to whites. Officers of the Division of Plans and Policies at Marine Corps headquarters responded promptly. They disputed George’s assertion regarding the assignment of family housing. They observed that African American Marines, white Marines, and their families had identical living quarters. The officers of the Division of Plans and Policies acknowledged that segregation and racial discrimination did exist in the town of Jacksonville where federally administered housing projects reflected the local laws and customs.

²⁵⁷ Nalty, *Long Passage to Korea: Black Sailors and the Integration of the U.S. Navy*, p. 38.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid*, pp.38-39.

The officers of the Division of Plans and Policies believed that official policy could go just so far in governing relations among servicemen of different races. They felt that the choice of friends was an individual right of each Marine. The racial prejudice that George pointed out could only be eliminated only by the individual, which takes a lot of time. Legislation alone could not do this job.

These problems aside, the U.S. Navy achieved a great deal during the Korean War. The Navy's policy of equal treatment and opportunity resulted in the more efficient use of manpower. African American men and women were now being trained and assigned to tasks that fit their abilities. Attitudes seemed to be changing as well. For example, the Navy's refusal to cooperate with sponsors of racially segregated social events did not generate any serious opposition from sailors and marines.

One problem continued: almost half of the African Americans in the Navy were still stewards. In the fall of 1952, Lester Granger called attention to the steward branch issue by asking Secretary of the Navy Dan Kimball to comment on the allegations that 90% of African American personnel in the Navy continued to serve in the Steward Branch. Secretary Kimball was slow in providing accurate statistics, so Granger made another request. This time, a search of U.S. Navy records revealed that 54.95% of the stewards were African American.²⁵⁹

“Although this percentage may appear high to you,” Kimball conceded, “you must know...that a marked change has taken place since 1945.”²⁶⁰ Despite the great strides the U.S. Navy had made in the arena of integration, the old pattern of segregation survived. It was clear that the

²⁵⁹ BuPers, Personnel Statistics Branch. See BuPers, “Memo on Discrimination of the Negro,” January 24, 1959, BAF2-014. BuPers Technical Library.

²⁶⁰ Nalty, *Long Passage to Korea: Black Sailors and the Integration of the U.S. Navy*, p. 41.

composition of the Steward Branch was and would continue to reflect racial inequality in the U.S. Navy.

The racial integration of the U.S. Navy's Steward Branch also caught the eye again of New York Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. He asked an assistant secretary of the Navy, "Will you be kind enough to advise me why your office continues to assign roughly one-half of the Negroes in the United States Navy to work as messmen?" In July 1953 as the Korean War was winding down, Powell denounced the Navy as a "modernized twentieth-century form of slavery" and asserted that "intelligent, ambitious Negroes are boycotting the United States Navy because they are not interested in making the world safe for democracy by shining shoes, nor are they interested in fighting communism with frying pans."²⁶¹

Powell's sarcasm was obvious here but there were several factors that influenced the racial composition of the Steward Branch. In addition to traditional practices, many African Americans continued to sign up for the Steward's Branch because of the potential for long-term employment and promotion. That African Americans reenlisted in the Steward Branch at a rate of 80% reflects their satisfaction. In addition, the low test scores of many African American recruits, who were often the products of inadequately funded primary and secondary schools, prevented them from being assigned to other jobs in the U.S. Navy. Practical realities thus clashed with the Navy's efforts to broaden the opportunities for African Americans through integration.

The racial integration of the Steward Branch continued to be an embarrassment for the U.S. Navy. The ongoing situation also convinced many African Americans who might be

²⁶¹ *The New York Times*, July 3, 1953, p. 9.

considering enlisting that the Navy was likely to steer African Americans away from non-steward duties. Attempts were made by the Navy to encourage stewards to qualify for other ratings during the Korean War but none of these attempts were successful.

After the Korean War ended, the U.S. Navy convened a panel to study ways to integrate the Steward Branch more fully. This panel did not favor offering special incentives to induce whites to volunteer for the Steward's Branch and it called for an end to recruiting expressly for the branch. Also, it proposed focusing Navy recruiting efforts in northern cities where integration was the norm.

On February 28, 1954, the Navy ended all first enlistments specifically for the Steward Branch. New recruits would be exposed to the range of opportunities in the Navy before they could join the Steward Branch. Recruits could not volunteer for steward duty until they completed boot camp. This would give the recruit a better sense of the variety of training the Navy offered him and his own suitability for the different specialties the Navy had to offer.

These and other measures eventually resulted in a demographic change in the Steward Branch. More Filipino, Chamorro, and white Americans joined the Steward Branch, so that by 1956, only 25.38% of the Navy's stewards were African American. Moreover, between 1956 and 1961, roughly 600 African American sailors transferred in grade from the steward billet to other ratings.²⁶²

African American naval personnel serving in Korea repeatedly demonstrated that they had much to contribute, some even making the ultimate sacrifice. When Jesse. L. Brown died in the mountains of North Korea in December of 1950, he was the only fully qualified African

²⁶² BuPers, Personnel Statistics Branch. See BuPers, "Memo on Discrimination of the Negro," January 24, 1959, BAF2-014. BuPers Technical Library.

American naval aviator and one of just twenty-one African American male and female officers. But other African Americans were ready to pick up the colors and move forward. Earl L. Carter pinned on his wings of gold in January 1951, earned a promotion to lieutenant (jg), and flew F9F Panther jets from the aircraft carrier *Bon Homme Richard* in combat operations over Korea. Ensign Albert Floyd became a naval aviator in March 1951 and served with the all-weather training unit at Naval Air Station, Key West, Florida. Second Lieutenant Frank F. Petersen Jr., the first African American Marine to become an aviator, earned his wings and his commission in October 1952. During the spring and summer of 1953, he flew sixty-four combat missions over Korea. Petersen retired from the Marine Corps as a lieutenant general.

The outstanding service of African Americans in the Korean War did not end the discrimination leveled against them, as demonstrated by the experiences of Ensign Louis Ivey. A graduate of the NROTC program at Pennsylvania State University, in 1954 Louis Ivey was assigned to the battleship *New Jersey*, which had recently returned from Korean waters. Ivey was the first African American officer to serve on the *New Jersey*. On the night he reported for duty, he found out that he was sharing a cabin with a white officer. The next morning the white officer pulled rank and insisted that Ivey find other living quarters. Ivey gradually made friends among the other officers of the *New Jersey* as he learned his duties in the boiler division and then in communications.

But social interactions ashore in segregated Norfolk, Virginia, proved to be more difficult. Ivey could not accompany his shipmates when they went to bars, restaurants, and theaters. He was forced to spend much of his off-duty time on the naval base, where he could enter the officers' club and other facilities, thanks to President Truman's Executive Order 9981.

When he did go on liberty in Norfolk, he associated mostly with the few other African American officers stationed in the area, being careful to observe Norfolk's racial laws and customs.

Only once during his career did the civilian hosts of a social event make a special effort to put him at ease. The sponsors of a dance held in Mayport, Florida, asked Ivey if he wanted them to arrange a date for him, as they had done previously for unmarried white officers. He agreed, and his date turned out to be a very nice African American girl. At other events, he remained more of a presence rather than a participant.

Overseas, Ivey discovered that he could move about freely in the company of officers of both races. For example, when the *New Jersey* put in at Cherbourg, France, he joined two white ensigns on a four-day trip to Paris. There they experienced none of the problems that the interracial group would have encountered in Norfolk.

Ivey understood that African American enlisted men were proud that one of their own had made it as an officer. He also realized that he could serve as a sounding board for the men. As an officer, he often came into contact with African American stewards in the wardroom. He found that they served him promptly and courteously, as if to make it easier for him to cope each day in the company of the mostly white crew on the *New Jersey*.

Getting along with the other officers could be tricky, for the Navy still had a way to go before achieving complete racial integration. Ivey often had to endure snubs and cruel jokes. He was always willing to make friends with whites but he was wary of approaching them. After completing the tour of active duty required of a reserve officer commissioned through the NROTC, Ivey returned to civilian life, entered medical school, and became a prominent surgeon.

Although the Navy in which Ensign Ivey served continued to reflect the racial prejudices of a society segregated by law and custom, the life of the African American naval officer had

significantly improved since World War II. When the first African American officers received their commissions in 1944, some white enlisted personnel refused to salute them. As late as the Korean War, a restaurant in Oxnard, California, refused to serve an African American naval officer unless he sat in isolation at a table near the kitchen. A white naval officer later arrived and threatened to have the restaurant declared off-limits to naval personnel unless the restaurant owner changed his seating policy. The owner eventually backed down. By carrying out President Truman's policy of equal treatment and opportunity, of the Navy, as well as the other armed forces, the Navy had moved ahead of American society, which was slowly progressing toward racial integration.

Chapter 5 - Racism in the U.S. Navy to 1941

Besides fighting the enemies of the United States, African Americans faced a second and more dangerous foe, racism, which restricted their opportunities within the American military and in general American society. This chapter will show that racism in the U.S. Navy evolved over time, and at some points in the Navy's history it was somewhat different (in its expression through actions, stated policies, etc.) than at other times.

The only place where any degree of real racial equality existed in pre-Revolutionary War America was at sea. Circumstances rather than compassion among the white majority were responsible. Conditions aboard merchant and fishing vessels as well as on military privateers were so intolerable that many white sailors deserted; ship captains were therefore often forced to rely on free African Americans and slaves to man the ships, whether local fishing vessels, freighters, privateers, or even pirate vessels. Many ambitious slaves gained freedom by running away to join the crews of privateers.

During the Revolutionary War, in addition to serving in the Continental Army, state militias, and units of American allies, African Americans fought in the new nation's navy. Conditions aboard ships had improved little since the early days of the colonies. Sailors willing to accept the dangers, discomfort, and separation from home for long periods of time were hard to find. These factors discouraged recruits so much so that a captain would settle for any able-bodied hand regardless of his race. As a result, African American sailors served on Continental Navy men-of-war and on state naval vessels and privateers. A number of African American sailors joined privateers, risking their lives in return for a share of the profits from commerce raiding. Neither the states nor the federal government passed any legislation or issued any orders

forbidding naval recruitment of African Americans. As early as 1775, the various American navies actively recruited African American seamen. A Newport, Rhode Island recruiting poster boldly proclaimed: “Ye able backed sailors, men white or black, to volunteer for naval service in ye interest of freedom.”²⁶³

The discourse on the nature of liberty and the rights of man generated by the Revolution raised the first debates on the legitimacy of slavery. Among anti-slavery advocates, the issue of slaves serving in the navy so their owners could collect their pay became the first test of their ability to influence public opinion. The most notable objection to slave sailors appeared in 1777, well before the cessation of hostilities. Originally printed in Philadelphia by the pseudonym and author Antibiastes, the *Observations on the Slaves and the Indentured Servants, Inlisted [sic] in the Army, and in the Navy of the United States* blasted the U.S. government for waging a war for national freedom while maintaining slavery in its aftermath. Antibiastes praised the government for its “resolve . . . for prohibiting the importation of Slaves . . . in the cause of mankind” but criticized the Continental Congress for not guaranteeing slaves their freedom as a reward for their sacrifice. Citing French and Spanish policies of freeing their slave veterans, Antibiastes castigated the government because it “hazarded to employ Slaves in their wars; but immediate, or conditional emancipation was . . . held up.” Quite the opposite, “the slaves . . . intrusted [sic] with arms, in the defence [sic] of their territories, were not only allowed to dispose of their whole pay as they saw fit” but risked battle for the profit of their owners. Despite pleas that the government “cannot suffer them to be ungrateful,” the small social advance gained by African

²⁶³ Michael Lee Lanning, *The African American Soldier: From Crispus Attucks to Colin Powell*, (Secaucus, New Jersey, Carol Publishing Group, 1997, p. 14.

American sailors during the Revolution disappeared with the Continental Navy.²⁶⁴

Service in the American Revolution had earned for some African Americans freedom, individual renown, and perhaps a measure of economic security. But African Americans found that the postwar period held no real rewards for them. Slavery continued to flourish in the South, and discrimination and segregation marked the lives of African Americans in the North. Irish and German immigrants poured into the United States, particularly in the northern states, and took many of the menial jobs traditionally held by free African Americans.

Regardless of freedom or the recent military service on the part of African Americans, a majority of white Americans continued to view African Americans with contempt and fear, considering them lazy but violent, semi-civilized if human at all, and given to lust and lying. Much of this picture stemmed from the nature of involuntary servitude. What slave, after all, would exert himself voluntarily, display initiative, or tell a truth unpleasant to the hearer when the alternatives brought the same reward? The protective mechanisms developed during slavery thus came to be considered by most white Americans as characteristics of the entire African American race.²⁶⁵

Convinced of their supremacy, the white citizens of the emergent United States sought to exclude African Americans, slave and free, from normal society. This attitude also influenced the composition of the new nation's military forces. The American military, which before had been an avenue to freedom and status for African Americans, now, in peacetime, excluded them.

²⁶⁴ Antibiastes, *Observations on the Slaves and the Indentured Servants, Inlisted [sic] in the Army, and in the Navy of the United States* (Philadelphia, 1777), pp. 1-4.

²⁶⁵ Bernard C. Nalty, *Strength for the Fight: A History of Black Americans in the Military*, (New York: The Free Press, 1986) p. 19.

At first, Congress believed that a militia, locally recruited and trained, could defend the United States from attacks by Native Americans living in the wilderness. On May 8, 1792, Congress passed the Militia Act, which called for the enrollment of “each and every able-bodied white male citizen between the ages of 18 and 45.”²⁶⁶ Although the act made no mention of African Americans, free or slave, most federal and state recruiters interpreted the wording to exclude African Americans altogether. Paradoxically, only militias in the South ignored the “whites only” implication. In Georgia and South Carolina freemen continued to enlist as laborers, pioneers, and musicians, and some slaves served in units when plantation owners “hired out” their African American property for military support duties. In North Carolina free African Americans could enlist in the militia and serve in a variety of positions until 1812, when restrictions limited them to duties only as musicians.²⁶⁷ Gradually the policy of exclusion became complete, as local militia companies evolved into social clubs, not unlike the latter-day volunteer fire departments.

Along with white camaraderie, fear contributed to this exclusion of African Americans when the Navy was re-born in the 1790s, for the black slaves of Haiti, led by Touissant L’Ouverture, had rebelled against their masters, slaughtered those whites who did not flee Haiti and created a black republic. Some white Americans became concerned that a militia that accepted African Americans might bring forth an L’Ouverture capable of rallying the slaves of the South.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁶ Militia Act of 1792, *U.S. Statutes at Large*.

²⁶⁷ Foner, p. 21.

²⁶⁸ Foner, p. 21.

The stories of racial warfare and the atrocities in Haiti, caused the tightening of Southern slave codes, the exclusion of African Americans from state militias, and the barring in 1798 of “Negroes, mulattoes, or Indians” along with “Persons whose Characters are suspicious,” from the Navy.²⁶⁹ Colonel William Ward Burrows, Commandant of the Marine Corps, issued similar instructions, although he permitted the use of African American fifers and drummers to attract crowds for recruiters.²⁷⁰ The armed forces, whether national or state, were striving toward a vision of their own, an exclusively white military establishment.

Racial exclusivity became the order of the day in the Marine Corps and the Army. Enlisting only whites caused no shortage of manpower, since both organizations were small. The Marine Corps initially recruited ship’s detachments of about twenty-five men as new frigates joined the fleet and by 1800 numbered no more than a thousand men serving afloat or at barracks ashore. The post-Revolutionary Regular Army at first totaled a few hundred soldiers, expanding beyond 3,000 only to meet specific threats posed by Native Americans. Interestingly enough, while the uniformed military excluded African Americans, the small civilian-operated War Department that administered the Army did not. Caesar Lloyd Cummings, a free African American, was one of the department’s six full-time employees. He served as clerk, messenger, doorkeeper, and janitor.²⁷¹

²⁶⁹ Letter, Secretary of the Navy Benjamin Stoddert to Lieutenant Henry Kenyon, August 8, 1798, in Office of Naval Records and Library, *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi War between the United States and France*, vol. I (Washington, 1935), p. 281.

²⁷⁰ Letter, Colonel William Ward Burrows to Lieutenant John Hall, September 8, 1798, Commandant’s Letter Books, RG 127, National Archives.

²⁷¹ Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution*, (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1961), pp. 10-11; Edwin H. Simmons, *The United States Marines, 1775-1975* (New York, 1976), pp. 14-15; Richard Kohn, *Eagle and Sword: The Federalists and the Creation of the Military Establishment in America, 1783-1802*, (New York, 1975), pp. 60-64, 176, 290.

Although the Army and the Marine Corps, for the time being at least, managed to retain their all-white composition, the Navy had to reconsider its racial policy. Hard upon the announcement that African Americans were not welcome, naval recruiters began accepting them for service aboard ships of the U.S. Navy; they were unable to recruit a sufficient number of white sailors. So unattractive was the combination of harsh discipline, dangerous work aloft, long cruises, wormy biscuits, and bad beef that the Navy had to accept almost anyone willing to serve, white or not.

As a result, African Americans steadily found opportunities available in the Navy. There is no evidence that the Navy's 1798 order barring African Americans received much attention from naval recruiters, and if a ban against recruitment of African American sailors did ever occur, it was of short duration. In fact, during the time of the order and for several years afterward, names of African American sailors appeared on nearly every U.S. Navy ship's crew list, including that of its primary warships the *Constitution* and the *Constellation*.

During the War of 1812, Nathaniel Shaler, captain of the privateer *Governor Tompkins*, found his African American crewmen exceptionally brave. After a devastating battle in the Atlantic Ocean, Shaler wrote:

The name of one of my poor fellows who was killed ought to be registered in the book of fame, and remembered with reverence as long as bravery is considered a virtue. He was a black man, by the name of John Johnson. A twenty-four-pound shot struck him in the hip, and took away all the lower part of his body. In this state, the poor brave fellow lay on the deck, and several times exclaimed to his shipmates, 'Fire away, my boys: no haul a color down.'²⁷²

²⁷² *Nile's Weekly Register*, Saturday, February 26, 1814, 2.

Shaler also noted that another wounded African American sailor, John Davis, who was wounded in a similar fashion, asked to be thrown overboard because he felt “he was only in the way of others.” Shaler concluded in his report: “When America has such tars, she has little to fear from the tyrants of the ocean.”²⁷³

Not all American naval commanders shared such respect for their African American sailors, at least not initially. In the summer of 1813, Captain Oliver Hazard Perry, in command of a flotilla on the Great Lakes, wrote: “The British are off the harbor. For God’s sake and yours, as well as mine, send me men and officers, and I will have them all in a day or two.” Perry eventually received some replacements, but he felt they were too few and of low caliber: “The men that came aboard are indeed a motley set - blacks, soldiers, and boys! I cannot think you saw them after they were selected. I am however, pleased to see any thing in the shape of a man.”²⁷⁴

Perry’s commander, Commander Isaac Chauncey, did not take kindly to his subordinate’s comments. Chauncey issued the following sharp reply, expressing the traditional attitude of the Navy towards its use of African Americans:

I regret that you are not pleased with the men sent you by Messrs. Champlin and Forrest; for, to my knowledge, a part of them are not surpassed by any seamen we have in the fleet: and I have yet to learn that the color of the skin, or the cut and trimmings of the coat, can affect a man’s qualifications or usefulness. I have nearly fifty blacks on board of this ship, and many of them are among my best men; and those people you call soldiers have been to sea from two to seventeen years; and I presume that you will find them as good and useful as any men on board of your vessel; at least, if I can judge by comparison; for those which we have on board of this ship are attentive and obedient, and, as far as I can judge,

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ Alexander Slidell Mackenzie, *Life of Perry* (New York, 1840), vol. I, pp. 165-166, 186-187.

many of them excellent seamen: at any rate, the men sent to Lake Erie have been selected with a view of sending a fair proportion of petty officers and seamen; and I presume, upon examination, it will be found that they are equal to those upon this lake.²⁷⁵

Because of the unpopularity of Great Lakes duty, as many as one-half of Perry's men were African American, in part lured by the 25% wage increase offered to volunteers for Great Lakes duty. Perry's flagship, the USS *Lawrence*, featured men from a contingent of "three hundred and sixty colored Marines, in military pomp and naval array."²⁷⁶

Best remembered for his victory message, "We have met the enemy, and they are ours," Perry, who was initially skeptical of the abilities of African Americans, found them to be all that Commodore Chauncey had said that they were. In his battle report for the Battle of Lake Erie, Perry acknowledged the African American contribution to the fight by stating that they "seemed to be absolutely insensible to danger," and he specifically cited African Americans Cyrus Tiffany, Jessie Walle, and Abraham Chase for their individual bravery.²⁷⁷ Perhaps because conditions on aboard ship, even on the Great Lakes, were so arduous, the Royal Navy also found it inexpedient to reject potential recruits on the grounds of race.

In the two decades after the War of 1812, African Americans in the northern states were increasingly denied the right to vote. Ironically, while new state constitutions eliminated white property qualifications, African American voting rights were being either severely restricted or altogether eliminated. During debates at state constitutional conventions, defenders of the

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ Martin R. Delany, *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States*. (Philadelphia, 1852), 83.

²⁷⁷ George Livermore, *An Historical Research representing the Opinions of the Founders of the Republic on Negroes as Slaves, Citizens, and as Soldiers*, (Boston: A. Williams and Company, 1863), p. 161. Cited hereafter as "Livermore."

African American right to vote cited African American military service as justification for their voting rights. One Federalist delegate to the New York convention declared:

In the War of the Revolution, these people helped to fight your battles by land and by sea. Some of your states were glad to turn out corps of colored men, and to stand ‘shoulder to shoulder’ with them. In your late war, they contributed largely towards some of your most splendid victories... They were volunteers... to defend that very country... which had treated them with insult, degradation, and slavery.²⁷⁸

All such appeals failed except in Rhode Island, where African American service in suppressing the Dorr Rebellion of 1842 led to a reinstatement of the voting rights lost two decades earlier.

African Americans not only lost the right to vote but were segregated in housing, religion, transportation, and public institutions. When the Marquis de Lafayette visited American in 1824 for the first time since the American Revolution, he was amazed to find that prejudice seemed much greater than in the revolutionary days, when, as he recalled, “black and white soldiers messed together without hesitation.”²⁷⁹

Under the act of March 3, 1813, free African Americans continued to make up to 10% to 20% of those serving in the U.S. Navy. Usher Parsons, who was a naval surgeon during the War of 1812, noted that segregation rarely occurred on board naval vessels of these years, he wrote:

In 1812, our fleet sailed to the Upper Lakes to cooperate with colonel Croghan at Mackinac. In 1816, I was a surgeon of the *Java*, under Commodore Perry. The white and colored seamen messed together. About one in six or eight were colored. In 1819, I was a surgeon of the *Guerriere*, under Commodore Macdonough; and the proportion of blacks was about the same in her crew. There seemed to be an entire absence of prejudice against the blacks as messmates among the crew. What I have said applies to

²⁷⁸ Foner, p. 26.

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

the crews of the other ships that sailed in squadrons.²⁸⁰

In contrast, the U.S. Navy continued to recruit free African Americans under the policy affirmed during the War of 1812, for service aboard rarely attracted men able to earn a living in some other way. The forecastle became the haven of many criminals, drunks, and sexual deviants who could not find refuge ashore. No wonder that any steady, sober individual was welcome, regardless of his skin color. Although it accepted free African Americans for service alongside white sailors, the Navy in 1816 barred slaves from serving aboard ship and excluded them from working at navy shipyards. The prohibition against slave labor ashore reassured the shipwrights, sailmakers, and other skilled workers who feared competition from unsalaried labor. Afloat, the slave seemed a potential source of trouble. Perhaps he would establish a common bond with free African Americans in the crew and, while not actually fomenting mutiny, demean the status of every free man in the Navy.²⁸¹

Naval officers did not always heed these restrictions, as William McNally, a former naval gunner, observed. According to McNally, officers on board the USS *Java* often signed on their slaves as crew members and then pocketed their pay. This corrupt practice, he continued, took root in the southern navy yards, where slaves often took positions away from whites and free African Americans.²⁸² Slaves, however, made up only a small percentage of African

²⁸⁰ George Livermore, *An Historical Research representing the Opinions of the Founders of the Republic on Negroes as Slaves, Citizens, and as Soldiers*, (Boston: A. Williams and Company, 1863), pp. 160-161. It should be noted that Parsons wrote his recollections more than forty years later during the Civil War, and so may have attempted to put relations between the races in a favorable light.

²⁸¹ Fifteenth Congress, 1st Session, *Rules, Regulations, and Instructions for the Naval Service*, April 20, 1818, in *American State Papers: Naval Affairs* (Washington, 1834), vol. 1, p. 511.

²⁸² William McNally, *Evils and Abuses in the Naval and Merchant Service Exposed*, (Boston: Cassady and Marca, 1839), p. 127.

Americans in the Navy. At least in part because of such accusations, a new set of regulations was promulgated by the Navy Department, which decreed that no slave was “to be entered for the naval service or to form part of the complement of any vessel of war of the United States.”²⁸³

Despite the acknowledged heroism of African Americans during the War of 1812, official attitudes toward African Americans in the United States armed services were changing for the worse. In 1815 the War Department directed the discharge of all “soldiers of color as being unfit to associate with American soldiers.” The Navy on the other hand, never subscribed to this harsh attitude because it could ill afford to ban veteran sailors, and African Americans continued to serve.

Problems in southern ports and with southern naval officers worsened conditions for African Americans, however.²⁸⁴ The institution of slavery imposed restrictions on African American sailors in many Southern states. In 1822, South Carolina passed the first of many state laws referred to as the Negro Seaman Acts. Denmark Vesey’s slave revolt had recently ended, and it had frightened the slave-owners in South Carolina. Afraid that free African American seamen in South Carolina would harbor insurrectionary thoughts, the state required them to remain in city jails until their ships were ready to leave port. A ship owner’s failure to reclaim his African American sailors could result in a \$1000 fine and two months’ jail time. The incarcerated sailor could face sale into slavery, even if he were free. This law applied not only to American merchantmen but to American warships and foreign merchantmen as well. Despite

²⁸³ Foner, p. 26.

²⁸⁴ Michael Cohn and Michael K. H. Platzer, *Black Men of the Sea* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1978), 122.

protests from the British government and a federal circuit court ruling that this policy was unconstitutional, South Carolina continued to enforce the Negro Seaman Acts. Georgia, North Carolina, Florida, Alabama, and Louisiana enacted similar laws.²⁸⁵

Despite Southern attempts to restrict their movements with the Negro Seaman Acts, African American sailors continued to enlist in the Navy in substantial numbers throughout the 1820s and 1840s. In 1842, James Silk Buckingham, an ex-member of the British Parliament, was touring the USS *Brandywine* berthed at the Gosport Navy Yard in Norfolk, Virginia. He observed the following:

In the *Brandywine* there were forty able seamen, who were free negroes. I was much struck with the fine, and even noble appearance of these men; their erect and muscular forms no longer crouching under the influence of forced servitude, nor their heads hung down under a conscious of inferiority, but leading a free, bold, independent, and active life, their appearance partook of these new influences, and they were among the finest-looking men in the ship. In answer to my inquiries of the first-lieutenant, who had been upwards of thirty years in the service, I learnt that they received exactly the same bounty, the same wages, the same rations, and the same privileges as whites; and that in their arrangements and classification for duty, as fore-castle-men, top-men, waisters, and after-guard, no distinction was made between black and white, but each were mingled indiscriminately, and classed only by their relative degrees of seamanship. In this, he said, the blacks were not at all inferior to the whites, either in skill, readiness, or courage. Nor did the white seamen evince the slightest reluctance to be associated with them on terms of the most perfect equality in the discharge of their duties, or make their colour a subject of antipathy or reproach. The cooks and stewards were chiefly colored men, because they stand the heat better, and fall into these occupations more readily; and from the negro seamen, the launch for wooding and watering, and for anchor duty, was generally manned, because the African constitution could stand the heat of the sun, and the atmosphere of swamps and marshes, better, than the American. In point of health, however, they were quite equal; and while the service was rendered more efficient by this arrangement, neither party objected to the classification. It was really to me a most agreeable sight to see forty or fifty of these fine athletic Africans holding up their heads like men, and looking as if conscious of their independence and equality, though at the same time respectful, obedient, and less frequently subjected to punishment for

²⁸⁵ Gaddis Smith and Clark G. Reynolds, eds., "Black Seamen and the Federal Courts," *Proceedings of the North American Society of Oceanic History* 12 (1978): 7-9.

neglect of duty, than their white brethren.²⁸⁶

There were those who objected to the racial composition of the various naval squadrons. Acting Secretary of the Navy Isaac Chauncey, who had commanded African American sailors in the War of 1812, took note in 1839 of “complaints of the number of African Americans and other colored persons entered at some recruiting stations and the consequent under-proportion of white persons transferred to ships or naval stations.” He imposed a quota on the recruitment of African Americans, declaring that in the future the number accepted would not exceed 5% of the “whole number of white persons” enlisted “weekly or monthly.”²⁸⁷ This level remained fairly constant until the American Civil War.

For the representatives of an increasingly militant slave-owning South, this quota was not acceptable. Senator John C. Calhoun of South Carolina, a state that threatened to jail any African American sailor who dared step ashore there, tried in 1842 to bar from the naval service all African Americans except cooks or personal servants.²⁸⁸ Calhoun expressed the feelings of many of his fellow Americans in both the South and the North when he stated that “those who have to sustain the honor and glory of the country” should not be “degraded by being mingled and mixed up with an inferior race.”²⁸⁹ Although the Senate ignored the heroism of African American seamen in previous wars and approved Calhoun’s proposal, the House of

²⁸⁶ James Silk Buckingham, *Slave States of America*, vol. 2 (London: Fisher, Son & Co., 1842), 471-473.

²⁸⁷ Navy Department Circular, September 13, 1839, in *Regulations, Circulars, Orders, and Decisions for the Guide of Officers of the Navy of the United States, Issued Since the Publication Authorized by the Navy in March 1832* (Washington, 1851).

²⁸⁸ Leon F. Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860* (Chicago, paperback edition, 1961), p. 33.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

Representatives allowed the matter to perish, apparently satisfied by assurances from Secretary of the Navy Abel P. Upshur that African Americans made up “not more than one-twentieth part of the crew of any vessel.”²⁹⁰ The Navy’s acceptance of African Americans continued to testify not so much to an appreciation of their contributions in time of war as to the difficulty of recruiting white Americans for service afloat.

Despite Senator Calhoun’s feelings, there was probably less racial prejudice and tension on naval vessels than anywhere else in American society in the 1840s. More examples of “warm comradeship” and a “relaxed relationship” have been found between the races than instances of racial prejudice. The word “nigger” was almost never used by enlisted men except in quoting an officer. African Americans, however, seem to have had more of their share of punishments in some cases, especially floggings. However, officers’ servants were exempt from such punishment.²⁹¹

Of the 160,000 Americans serving in the Mexican War of 1846-1848, officially, none were African American, because the U.S. Army did not allow African Americans to serve. Most accounts of the war state, if they make any mention of it at all, that no African Americans served. Actually, several did join American forces in Mexico and served as body servants to Army officers or in support roles. Historians, however, have forgotten to record their names or discuss any of their specific accomplishments. Although relegated to only a footnote in the official naval histories of the Mexican War, at least one thousand African American sailors served aboard

²⁹⁰ Colored Persons in the Navy of the U.S., A Letter from the Secretary of the Navy, August 5, 1842, in *The Negro in the Military Service of the United States*.

²⁹¹ Foner, p. 27.

American warships blockading Mexican ports. They also served as crew members of vessels delivering men and supplies to American forces on the east coast of Mexico.²⁹²

While historical scholarship has revealed the intense racism and stereotyping that African American soldiers overcame to serve in the Union Army, the Union Navy accepted African Americans with relatively little friction. Compared with the Union Army, the Union Navy compiled a highly credible record of race relations during the Civil War. Although African American soldiers did not appear on the battlefield in large numbers until after the passage of the Emancipation Proclamation, African American sailors fought from the start of the conflict. In addition to integrated crews, the Navy provided African American sailors with equal pay and benefits, opportunities for promotion, an equal standard of living, and health care. A study of Union Navy courts-martial shows that African Americans fared better in court than white defendants did. Also, compared to the Union Army, racial disturbances were minimal. The shared wartime experience, along with a tradition of African American service in the U.S. Navy, tended to minimize racial problems. This does not mean that some incidents of racial hatred did not occur, as one would expect in the mid-nineteenth century, but the historical record shows that the racial harassment and persecution that took place in the Union Navy did not occur as frequently as it did in the Union Army.²⁹³

The racial tolerance of the Union Navy is clear, but the personal relations between sailors of both races could not be mandated by the Navy Department. The attitudes of Union naval officers who commanded African Americans varied widely. Some officers spoke very highly of

²⁹² Ibid, p. 29.

²⁹³ Steven J. Ramold, *Slaves, Sailors, Citizens: African Americans in the Union Navy*, (DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois Press, 2002), p. 5.

the African Americans who served under them. The efficiency of African Americans who handled naval ordnance was praised by Captain Samuel F. DuPont after his victory at Port Royal in November 1861. Their proficiency with heavy artillery encouraged the later formation of African American artillery battalions in the Army. Stephen Blanding, supervising repairs on one ship, “had four men from the *Louisiana* to help me... Besides these I had twelve contrabands, most of them quite good ship carpenters.” A. J. Hopkins, an engineer at the Washington Navy Yard, conducted major repairs on a frigate’s steam machinery in a few days with “only the aid of three or four contraband negroes.”²⁹⁴

Segregation and discrimination were minimal in the Union Navy, but racism did exist, and some officers did little to disguise their prejudices. There seems to have been a greater eagerness among some naval officers to prevent what they referred to as “Negro excesses” than to defeat the rebels.²⁹⁵ David G. Farragut of New Orleans fame was a good example of this type. Farragut, then a flag officer, informed Secretary of the Navy Welles that sailors of his squadron “disagree with them [contrabands] so much that we are obliged [sic] to be very rigid with the sailors in consequence. The contrabands soon desert because of the ill feeling manifested toward them by the sailors.”²⁹⁶ Captain Andrew H. Foote, while trying to man his gunboats for the campaigns on the Western waters, cautioned one of his recruiting officers that

²⁹⁴ Foner, p. 47; Stephen E. Blanding, *Recollections of a Sailor Boy; or The Cruise of the Gunboat Louisiana*, (Providence, Rhode Island: E.A. Johnson, 1886), pp. 158-159; Phyllis H. Haughton, *Dearest Carrie: Civil War Letters Home*, (Lawrenceville, Virginia: Brunswick, 1995), p. 131.

²⁹⁵ Order given to Lt. Collins by Flag Officer DuPont, Nov. 10, 1861, in *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion* (Washington, 1894-1921), series 1, volume 12, p. 338. Cited hereafter as “ORN.”

²⁹⁶ William N. Still, Jr., “The Common Sailor.” Part 1. “The Yankee Blue Jackets,” *Civil War Times Illustrated*, 23 (February 1985): pp. 56. Cited hereafter as “Still, Jr.”

“as there are objections or difficulties in the Southern country about colored people, we do not want any of that class shipped.”²⁹⁷

Bradley S. Osbon, an officer aboard the USS *Hartford* believed African American sailors to be:

...more of an encumbrance than an article of use, aboard a man-of-war, and...I wish we were rid of them...they are a nuisance not to be tolerated...a white man cannot speak to one of them and receive a civil answer...I pity them, because they have not good sense, for if they had, they would never leave a plantation (a good home during their whole life, and a kind master,) to cast themselves adrift upon ...a cold, unfeeling world. I know many will...wish themselves back from whence they were foolish enough to run away.²⁹⁸

Most captains of the Union Navy followed Secretary Welles’s directions regarding African Americans and integrated them into all shipboard activities. A few, however, were obviously prejudiced and accentuated the discrimination that did exist. Rear Admiral David Dixon Porter, veteran of Fort Fisher and the Atlantic Blockade, self-proclaimed captor of New Orleans, and the commander of the Mississippi River Squadron, was a prime offender. His use of the word “nigger” and the distinctions he often made between “men” and “darkies” were commonplace.²⁹⁹ Similarly, his instructions that contrabands were to receive no more than \$9 per month, issued after the Navy Department had announced the policy of enlisting them with ratings up to landsmen (who were paid \$12 per month), and in the face of the fact that even first class boys received \$10, would seem to have no other explanation than bigotry.³⁰⁰ Porter often

²⁹⁷ Foner, p. 47.

²⁹⁸ Bradley S. Osbon, *Cruise of the U.S. Flag-Ship Hartford, 1862-1863*, (New York: L.W. Paine, 1863), p. 43.

²⁹⁹ *ORN*, series 1, vol. 22, p. 603; *ORN*, series 1, vol. 24, p. 678.

³⁰⁰ Acting Rear Admiral Porter to Acting Volunteer Lieutenant R.K. Riley, Cairo, Dec. 9, 1862, in *ORN*, series 1, volume 23, p. 619.

complained of his “difficulties of keeping them” and requested permission “to get rid of some on board” his ships. He also knew that the whites of his fleet were from the Midwest, a region with few African Americans and numerous racists.

Porter also segregated his crews. In July 1863, Porter announced, “Owing to the increasing sickness in the [Mississippi] squadron, and the scarcity of men, it becomes necessary for the efficiency of the vessels to use the contrabands to a greater extent than heretofore.” He went on to remark that white men, when performing strenuous labor under the southern sun, seemed most susceptible to disease and that therefore African Americans only were to be used under such conditions, with “every precaution being taken to keep them from being sick.” African Americans could be used “to defend the vessels” where a deficiency in the crew required. This policy, Porter explained, was “dictated by necessity,” yet it was believed that “in many cases of emergency the blacks will make efficient men.” Porter announced that contrabands might be promoted to all ranks except that of petty officers and first class firemen and seamen, the last two exceptions being contrary to Navy Department policy as enunciated by the Secretary eight months earlier. Porter’s order continues:

Only clothes enough will be issued to them to make them comfortable until they are out of debt, and in all cases they must be kept distinct from the rest of the crew. They can be stationed at guns when vacancies exist, to pass shots and powder, handle handspikes, at train-tackles and side-tackles, pumps, and fire buckets; and can be exercised separately at great guns and small arms.

Porter ended this pronouncement by asserting that “they [African Americans] are not naturally clean in their persons” and insisted that they be “kept distinct from the rest of the crew.”³⁰¹

³⁰¹ General Order No. 26, dated off Vicksburg, July 26, 1863, in *ORN*, series 1, volume 25, pp. 327-328.

In addition to segregating his crews, Porter also told his commanders “not to employ negroes as lookout, as they are not fit to [be] intrusted [sic] with such important duty....”³⁰² He also employed most of his African American crewmen below decks in menial positions. Faced with the same manpower shortages plaguing all Navy ships, Porter reluctantly signed on contraband to fill out his squadron’s manpower complement. Porter’s was an unusual attitude at a time when African Americans and whites shared the same mess and hung their hammocks side by side on board warships. He displayed a curious mixture of racism and respect toward his African American personnel, stating, “I cannot get men so I work darkies. They do first rate work and are far better behaved than their masters.”³⁰³

Compared to the varied attitudes of Union Naval officers who commanded African Americans, the opinions of white enlisted men are somewhat muted. Relatively few enlisted men had their experiences published, and those accounts that do exist are mostly tales of far away, exotic lands, not opinions regarding African American shipmates.

Other historical works on African American sailors have claimed a high level of racism by white enlisted men toward their African American colleagues, but many of their examples have been misinterpreted. For example, David Valuska claimed that “The white attitude towards blacks created a hostile barrier between the races...and hostilities were bound to occur.”³⁰⁴ Rather, there exists very little evidence of widespread racism on the part of white sailors, and

³⁰² Porter to Commander W. A. Parker, dated Hampton Roads, Nov. 24, 1864, in *ORN*, series 1, Volume 11, pp. 90-91.

³⁰³ General Order No. 26, dated Off Vicksburg, July 26, 1863, in *ORN*, series 1, volume 22, p. 603.

³⁰⁴ David Valuska, *The African American in the Union Navy, 1861-1865*, (New York: Garland, 1993), p. 67. Cited hereafter as “Valuska.”

certainly not enough to support a thesis of active discrimination. This does not mean though that racial harmony existed aboard ships of the Union fleet.

One of the most common Union naval memoirs used by historians to prove that racism existed in the Union Navy is the account of Rowland Stafford True, a sailor serving aboard the gunboat USS *Silver Lake*. The crew of 150 included thirty contraband who labored as coal heavers, firemen, and engineer's helpers. True described these contraband as a "happy-go-lucky set." True left this description of the gunboat's African American contingent:

One of them had an old fiddle and it was brought out every night. The music it made was cause for a general walk-around or a jig dance. One fellow we called "lippy" because of his thick lips. I never saw such thick lips on a human being, and his eyes were monstrous while his color was very black. We had much sport with him. They were usually good natured and full of fun, but sometimes were ugly and disobedient. I remember seeing one fellow tied up by the thumbs for two hours for disobedience, a severe punishment. The thumbs are tied together behind the back, and drawn upward until a part of his weight comes on the thumbs and the cord with which they are tied.³⁰⁵

The punishment received by the African American sailor may have had nothing to do with his race, as True described the *Silver Lake*'s officers as "overbearing and fond of showing their authority, [who] often punished and ill-treated their men when there was no necessity for it..."³⁰⁶

True also mentioned that the African American sailors aboard the USS *Silver Lake* had their meals provided from a "mess and mess cook...entirely separate from ours," implying that the African American sailors were segregated from their white colleagues. True's implication is

³⁰⁵ Rowland Stafford True, "Life Aboard a Gunboat," *Civil War Times Illustrated*, Volume 9, (February 1972), p. 38.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p.37. In 1850, Federal law prohibited flogging as a means of shipboard discipline.

incorrect, because messes in the nineteenth-century U.S. Navy were not places where one ate (a twentieth-century definition). With whom a sailor ate depended upon his watch schedule and where he worked. True mentioned that the African American crewmen were members of the engineering division, so their presence in a separate mess facility is no surprise. True also remarked that the USS *Silver Lake* had five separate messes. What True was observing was that African American sailors were in a different mess than his, not a separate mess from the whites.³⁰⁷

Another commonly cited example of the racism exhibited by the enlisted men of the Union Navy was the ship-sponsored minstrel show. One vessel, the USS *Brazileira*, hosted numerous derogatory plays that portrayed African Americans as inferior. Plays such as “Nigger in the Daguerreotype Saloon,” “Ethiopians,” “Virginia Mommy,” and “Nigger Serenade” increased racial dissension and drove a wedge between sailors of both races. Racial tensions grew to such monumental proportions aboard the *Brazileira*, that her commanding officer was forced to transfer the African Americans to another ship to prevent future violent outbreaks. This unfortunate consequence of the *Brazileira*’s racial tension, although rare, demonstrated the sinister side of American society from which the white sailors came and the poor judgment and leadership shown by the *Brazileira*’s commanding officer.³⁰⁸

The practice of dressing white sailors in blackface for minstrel shows aboard ships suggests that whites were lampooning African Americans by perpetuating the “Sambo” stereotype. Again, like the term “messes,” this is a twentieth-century misinterpretation of a

³⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 38.

³⁰⁸ Valuska, pp. 131-133; Still, Jr., p. 33.

common form of entertainment from the nineteenth-century. The Sambo stereotype had been a familiar feature of popular theater well before the Civil War, catering mostly to the working class. Some historians have argued convincingly that, far from satirizing African Americans, the Sambo stereotype was a manifestation of working class angst amid a changing world. New technologies, urban life, and the professionals who dominated the workingman's life were all targets of satire, an outlet from an increasingly confusing world. Sambo did not necessarily portray African Americans. Since theatergoers were whites from an industrial society, a polar opposite character, one in blackface, represented the more agrarian ideal of the past. The minstrel shows that appeared aboard Union vessels served a similar purpose for the enlisted men. It allowed them a means to complain about the food, the boredom of blockade duty, and ridicule their officers. While some enlisted men did not grasp the subtlety of the show and perceived only the strange behavior of the "black" performers, it is hard to classify these productions as racist when African American sailors themselves enjoyed performing in them.

The lack of institutional racism from the U.S. Navy could not prevent individual bigotry among its enlisted personnel. Many white sailors resented African Americans and said that they were the cause of the Civil War. In addition, the white sailor reflected the racial attitudes of the society from which he came. One glaring example of this is provided by the diary of a Civil War marine serving aboard the USS *Vanderbilt*, Miles M. Oviatt. On one occasion when he was granted liberty, Oviatt was absolutely disgusted when he found out who his liberty companions would be:

we wer [sic] hurried into a boat, and as there was some Niggars [sic] going, we had their company...having to put off with the niggars, had rather got the best of my better nature...consequently was in no humor to enjoy liberty.³⁰⁹

³⁰⁹ Mary P. Livingston, ed., *A Civil War Marine at Sea: The Diary of Medal of Honor Recipient Miles M. Oviatt*, (Shippensburg, Pennsylvania: White Mane, 1998), p. 69.

Another example of racist attitudes being reflected in the actions of an officer occurred aboard the USS *Silver Lake*, when the officer punished unclean sailors by having them “stripped and scrubbed with hickory brooms, in the hands of two strong Negroes. It wasn’t often a man needed a second scrubbing.” The embarrassment of a public bath was increased by the fact that African Americans were the crewmen selected to wash the white offender. That is, the racial perceptions of the crew were used by one of the *Silver Lake*’s officers to enforce ship discipline.³¹⁰

In March 1863, Thomas Wilton confessed to his attempted desertion from the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron. Drunk on a shore party, Wilton refused to return to the USS *Sebago*, stating that he “didn’t believe in fighting for niggers.” Wilton received a year of hard labor in a state penitentiary.

Aboard the USS *Nahant*, Alvah F. Hunter, a white sailor, described the officer’s cook as “about the ‘plainest’ negro I have ever met, and, like most negroes, he had no love for an Irish boy, which Barney certainly was; but I was just plain Yankee, and cook and I had no frictions.”³¹¹

The attitudes of white sailors towards their African American shipmates seem less racist than those of future sailors. Seamen from the ante-bellum U.S. Navy had long served side by side with African American crewmen, and the experienced sailors served as role models for the inexperienced, showing a racial tolerance that was rarely found in general American society. Second, most African American sailors quickly adapted to their new military

³¹⁰ True, p. 37.

³¹¹ Alvah F. Hunter, *A Year on a Monitor and the Destruction of Fort Sumter*, (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1987), p. 41.

role, perhaps earning a measure of respect from the white colleagues. Third, sailors of both races shared a common miserable existence. They ate the same food, shared common sleeping areas, and together had to contend with the most dreaded enemy of the Union Navy: the monotony of navy life. For those sailors serving blockade duty, boredom was more difficult. A warship serving on one of the rivers of the South at least offered a change of scenery from time to time. Men serving on a blockading vessel however had to endure the same daily routine, the same people, and the same scenery.³¹²

Racist attitudes and discriminatory actions towards African Americans were not confined to the gunboats of Admiral Porter's Mississippi Squadron or to the Navy at large, but rather emanated from the ingrained prejudice of American society. To the Navy's credit, however, the de facto segregation in the Mississippi Squadron was not formal navy policy. The Navy took an interest in ensuring fair treatment of its freedmen and on at least several occasions secured an approximation of justice for contraband injured at the hands of white sailors.³¹³ Unlike the Union Army, the Navy maintained largely integrated force, where both white and African American sailors lived and worked as a unit.

During the Civil War, the Navy conducted a unique experiment in social equality. From an insignificant prewar force, the Navy developed into a powerful part of the Union's war machine; one useless without manpower. Driven to win the war, the Union Navy proved willing

³¹² See James Merrill, "Men, Monotony, and Mouldy Beans: Life on a Civil War Blockader," *American Neptune*, 16 (1956), p. 140; Mary P. Livingston, ed., *A Civil War Marine at Sea: The Diary of Medal of Honor Recipient Miles M. Oviatt*, (Shippensburg, Pennsylvania: White Mane, 1998), p. 9; Israel E. Vail, *Three Years on the Blockade: A Naval Experience*, (New York: Abbey Press, 1902), p. 32; Bradley S. Osbon, *Cruise of the Flag-Ship Hartford, 1862-1863*, (New York: L. W. Paine, 1863), p. 47; Browning, *From Cape Charles to Cape Fear: The North Atlantic Blockading Squadron during the Civil War*, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993), p. 217.

³¹³ Valuska, pp. 106-111.

to grant social and legal rights to African Americans to induce their service. While African American soldiers endured segregation and abuse from the Union Army, the Union Navy provided African Americans numerous opportunities not normally open to them in general American society. Free African American sailors and, eventually former slaves, received the same pay as their white comrades. African American sailors were able to apply the skills they learned in the merchant marine or in a civilian trade in the various enlisted ratings of the Union Navy. African Americans normally received the same uniforms, provisions, medical care, living quarters, and weapons as their white shipmates. Space was limited aboard the American warships of the pre-dreadnought (battleship) era, and so both sleeping quarters and messing facilities were integrated. They also shared the boredom, dangers, and adventures of their white colleagues.

The Union Navy provided the African American sailor the opportunity to succeed. African Americans served in every enlisted billet and on every type of Union navy vessels. In an era where racial prejudices were common and African American sailors were witnessing a decline in their opportunities aboard civilian vessels, the Union Navy made a concerted effort to integrate its vessels and provide opportunities for advancement for African American sailors. Serving in every theater of the naval war and fighting heroically next to his white shipmates, African Americans greatly enhanced the Union Navy's ability to conduct successful operations against the Confederacy and eventually win the Civil War.

When the Civil War finally ended, the armies and the navies of the blue and gray melted away and the Union Navy ceased blockading the Southern coastline. For African Americans, the future looked bright. Radical Republicans dominated Congress in the immediate post-war years,

and they attempted to fix the ills in the South. They forced the revision of state constitutions to protect the civil rights of ex-slaves and extend education to them. To protect these changes, Republicans secured the passage of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments. These were designed to end slavery and protect civil liberties and voting rights, regardless of race or previous servitude. Republicans considered the fifteenth amendment, passed in 1870, to be the key to their efforts, as the protection of voting rights assured the Republicans a majority in Congress and gave those African Americans residing in the South a weapon to protect their interests.

As North and South came together, the Republican Party, with roots in the anti-slavery movement, lost its ardor for African American freedom. Moreover, the United States quickly wearied of the incessant clamors for reform. Americans wanted to put behind them the idealism and sacrifices made in the war and Reconstruction and to return to the mundane matters of everyday life.

The U.S. Navy, however, did not share in America's post-war expansion. The defeat of the Confederacy eliminated the need for a powerful naval arm, and the abolition of slavery ended the need to patrol off the coast of Africa for slave traders. Also, the relationship with Great Britain, America's enemy in the Revolution and the War of 1812, remained static. Moreover, the Navy played no role in Reconstruction, the reincorporation of the former Confederate states into the Union.

The Navy continued enlisting African Americans on a fully integrated basis because it was still difficult to fill the ranks. African American service, though, was limited to the ranks, and African American sailors who could qualify served as regular seamen, gunners, or gunner's

mates. The Navy signaled its wholesale acceptance of African American seamen by enrolling many youths in an apprenticeship program.

Within the U.S. Army, the four African American regiments that were established after the Civil War, led by white officers, continued to perform well but faced much of the same discrimination faced by their civilian brothers and sisters. Despite these conditions, the U.S. Army did provide equal pay and a semblance of equal, albeit separate, facilities. By 1900, the U.S. Army continued to be one of the few American institutions left that afforded African Americans opportunities for service, advancement, or accomplishment.

To many members of the U.S. Army, including General William T. Sherman, the U.S. Navy of the late nineteenth century seemed like a relatively open, integrated institution. In an effort to improve the conditions for African American soldiers, General Sherman suggested breaking up segregated army units and reassigning the members throughout the service, as the Navy was doing. In commenting for the Secretary of War on a letter urging Representative Ben Butler to muster support for the retention of the four post-Civil War African American regiments, whose existence was from time to time imperiled, General Sherman wrote:

Respectfully returned to the honorable secretary of war. I have watched with deep interest the experiment of using blacks as soldiers made in the army since the Civil War, and have on several occasions been thrown in with them in Texas, New Mexico, and the plains. General Benjamin F. Butler misconstrues me as opposed to the blacks as soldiers for I claim for them equality in the ranks as in civil life – whereas they now constitute separate organizations with white officers. In my former paper on this subject I advised that the word “black” be obliterated from the statute book, that whites and blacks be enlisted and distributed alike in the army, as has been the usage in the navy for a hundred years.

General Butler pronounces the blacks a docile, temperate, rugged race peculiarly qualified for being soldiers. Now if soldiers were, as some presume, an idle, lazy set, contented to eat their rations and do nothing, he might be right. But our soldiers are not of that sort; some in our eastern forts may be, but if General Butler will accompany Col. [Nelson A.] Miles, or [Colonel Ranald S.] Mackenzie or [Brigadier General David]

Stanley in camp against the Sioux he will be convinced. We want and must have men of muscle, endurance, will, courage, and that wildness of nature that is liable unless properly directed to result in violence and crime, to combat the enemies of civilization, with whom we have to contend. I honestly think the white race is the best for this, but [I] am willing to take black and white alike on equal terms, certainly a fairer rule than the present one of separating them into distinct organizations.³¹⁴

A wave of racism, fueled by competition for jobs between free African Americans and white immigrants, swept the North after the Civil War. This resurgence of racism also caused some northern states to ignore the laws enacted to protect the rights of African Americans. Meanwhile, the southern states instituted “black codes,” written and unwritten laws designed to keep African Americans in “their place” and remind them that they were not equal to whites. “Jim Crow” laws, named after a popular northern minstrel tune, were the embodiment of this latest version of racism. Jim Crow laws barred or restricted African Americans from certain schools, churches, hotels, restaurants, theaters and many other public facilities in the South. Whites often enforced these laws by lynching or burning African Americans. These laws impeded or reversed the social, economic, educational, and political gains that African Americans had achieved as a result of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments. By the end of the century, racism had taken firm root in every aspect of American life, and racial segregation became the law of the land. The Supreme Court’s decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) enshrined the principle of “separate but equal.”

Just as African Americans throughout the country saw the gains of Reconstruction quickly erode, African Americans in the Navy found the limitations aboard ship become increasingly restrictive. From its birth, the Navy had maintained a policy towards African

³¹⁴ Endorsement by General William T. Sherman to Secretary of War J.D. Cameron, 1 March 1877, of E.K. Davis to Hon. Benjamin F. Butler, 7 December 1876, *The Negro in the Military Service of the United States, 1639-1886*, Microfilm M858, National Archives, Washington, DC.

Americans that was in some ways discriminatory. With a few exceptions, the Navy limited African Americans to the role of seamen and frequently set low quotas on the number of African American enlistments.

By the waning years of the nineteenth century, other forms of racial exclusion became clear. First, the number of African Americans serving as second- or third-class petty officers dwindled to a handful, and none were listed as first-class petty officers in the second quarter of 1870, 1880, or 1890. Secondly, the assignments that African Americans were receiving no longer required seaman skills. They began doing the jobs usually performed by “landsmen.” Jonathan H. Paynter, a former African American sailor, defined “landsmen” as the service designation for domestics.³¹⁵ Landsmen, able-bodied men without nautical experience, performed a variety of unskilled tasks aboard ship, like cooking, cleaning up, or waiting on officers. African Americans became increasingly concentrated in the positions of cook and steward, their numbers jumping from 29% in 1870 to 49%, twenty years later.³¹⁶

Several factors contributed to this occupational imbalance. First, was the decline of America’s merchant fleet. During the Civil War, much of the America’s commercial fleet was destroyed, sold to other nations or transferred to the protection of foreign powers. This drastic reduction in maritime activity reduced the pool of experienced American seamen, forcing the Navy to accept recruits who were unaware of the workings of a ship. The percentage of African American sailors in the Navy with seafaring experience reflected this decline, dropping from 13% in 1870 to 6% in 1890.³¹⁷

³¹⁵ Jonathan H. Paynter, *Joining the Navy; or, Abroad with Uncle Sam* (Hartford, Connecticut: American Publishing Company, 1895), p. 19.

³¹⁶ Harrod, *Manning the New Navy*, p. 10.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

Second, the emergence of the steamship as the primary vessel of war reduced the Navy's dependence on merchant sailors, as the untrained "landlubber" could learn the intricacies of a boiler as readily as a deepwater sailor. The decline in geographical representation from the Northeastern states also affected job assignments, as the Navy accepted African Americans from the states of the Upper South, where African Americans with seafaring experience were fewer.

Although the Navy had no formal policy limiting African Americans to domestic roles, the service did nothing to prohibit the bias towards African Americans. At the discretion of its officers, a ship might be racially segregated by restricting African Americans to certain responsibilities where they would work and live with men performing similar tasks. By 1900, the Navy would abandon its policy of benign neglect and institutionalize segregation.³¹⁸

Ports along the East coast that had supplied most of the enlisted men could no longer provide the quantity nor quality of men sought to man a technologically advanced steam-powered fleet. The illiteracy rate in the Old Navy (33% in 1870) and the large numbers of foreigners (42% in 1890) also hampered the service's attempts to create a new image.³¹⁹ The development of a new recruiting program would severely restrict the shipboard roles of African Americans, and eventually forbid their enlistment.

The racial hostility so prevalent in general American society in the waning years of the nineteenth century eventually "crossed the gangplank" and found its way into Navy life. An "American seaman," writing in 1885 to the New York *Freeman* from a ship "in European waters," complained that there was "at present too much prejudice" toward African American seamen. The officers, he felt, tried to be fair but usually dealt out more severe punishments to

³¹⁸ Ibid.

³¹⁹ Harrod, *Manning the New Navy*, p.17, 56.

African Americans who broke the rules. The white sailors, and especially the foreign element in the Navy, “growl like the dog in the manger” about sharing watches, quarters, and messes with African American men.³²⁰ When famed abolitionist leader Frederick Douglass was appointed minister to Haiti in 1889, the Navy was ordered by the government to transport him to his new post. The first captain given the assignment resigned, the second claimed that his ship was unfit for seagoing voyage, and the third requested a transfer to a new command so he did not have to share the captain’s table with Douglass.³²¹

Blatant discrimination against African Americans was also shown by the Navy in the selection of their officers. The Navy resisted commissioning African Americans even though it accepted African American recruits. Even during the Civil War, when the U.S. Colored Troops were accepting a few African American officers, the Navy offered commissions exclusively to whites, whether wartime volunteers or graduates of the Naval Academy at Annapolis, Maryland. As a consequence of this policy, the African American pilot Robert Smalls, after delivering the Confederate steamer *Planter* into Union hands, received an appointment as an officer of Army volunteers, even though he spent most of his service aboard ship. The Navy Department’s official reason for spurning an individual with Smalls’s experience was that he lacked appropriate training at either the Naval Academy or a school for volunteer officers.³²²

Between 1865 and 1900, no African American gained a commission in the U.S. Navy. The Navy barred them from direct commissions. The only other avenue for commissions was

³²⁰ Foner, p. 67.

³²¹ Lanning, pp. 79-80.

³²² Okon Edet Uya, *From Slavery to Public Service: Robert Smalls, 1839-1915*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 20.

the U.S. Naval Academy, which proved to be just as inequitable as West Point. In fact, it was more so. Between 1872 and 1897, five African Americans were appointed to the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis but none graduated. The three midshipmen were forced to endure the same social ostracism and harassment African American cadets faced at West Point.

In the summer of 1897, the superintendent of the Naval Academy faced the possibility that two young African Americans were qualified to enter Annapolis. Captain P. H. Cooper, Superintendent of the United States Naval Academy, warned Secretary of the Navy John D. Long that a daunting challenge awaited any African American who entered the academy:

He [the African American midshipman] will not of course be *persona grata* with other cadets; he will lead a solitary and forlorn existence in social relations; in official matters he will be as the others are and have the countenance of the authorities. Within the walls of the academy he will have no associates of his color, for he can not look to the servants and messengers for companionship and if he can stand four years of such a life he will be rewarded with a certificate of proficiency.³²³

Neither man ever reported to Annapolis.

Captain Cooper's explanation of the problems that an African American midshipman would face goes far to explain why 104 years would have to pass before the first African American male would complete the four-year curriculum at Annapolis and be commissioned. No other African American received an appointment to the U.S. Naval Academy until 1936, more than seventy years after the end of the Civil War and sixty years after the resignation of the first three African American cadets. It was another thirteen years before Wesley A. Brown

³²³ Letter, Captain P. H. Cooper, superintendent, United States Naval Academy, to Secretary of the Navy John D. Long, May 11, 1897, in Bernard C. Nalty and Morris J. Macgregor, eds., *Blacks in the Military: Essential Documents*, (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1981), pp. 58-59.

became the first African American to graduate and receive his commission from the U.S. Naval Academy in 1949.

By way of comparison, African Americans had no greater opportunity to become officers in the regular army. By the end of the nineteenth century, just three African American cadets had endured the cruel hazing to emerge from the United States Military Academy as second lieutenants. One of them, however, Charles Young, attained the grade of lieutenant colonel on the eve of World War I.³²⁴

The total exclusion of African Americans from the American naval officer corps represented an interpretation of Social Darwinism that pointed to the Anglo-Saxon as the noblest product of human evolution. Existing naval records contain boundless examples of the widespread acceptance of Darwinism by American naval officers. To the average American naval officer, African Americans were “natural born thieves,” or worse. Because of his African origins, the African American male was considered to be an “absolute barbarian,” not far in advance of the ape. American naval officers who had served in African waters testified to the African’s physical stamina, but also to his “lack of inborn mental aptitude.” Rear Admiral John Grimes Walker preferred to wear gloves “for sanitary purposes” when members of the Haitian government came aboard his ship.³²⁵

Marine Colonel L. W. T. Waller told a House Naval Affairs Committee in 1916 that the

³²⁴ Henry Ossian Flipper was admitted to the U.S. Military Academy in 1873 and became the first African American graduate of that institution in 1877.

³²⁵ See, for example, Ensign Robert Welles to his mother, June 23, 1887, and December 3, 1900, Welles Papers, Naval Historical Foundation; Rear Admiral Louis Goldsborough to his wife, August 20, 1873, volume 19, Goldsborough Papers, Library of Congress; Commodore Robert Shufeldt, “The Future of Cuba,” undated manuscript, Box 20, Shufeldt Papers, Naval Historical Foundation; Albert S. Barker, *Everyday Life in the Navy*, (Boston, 1928), p. 240.

Haitians would be “much better off” under a dictatorial military government.” When Representative Oscar Calloway asked Waller if he believed that all people would be better off with military dictators, Waller replied, “No sir ...just these people.”³²⁶

As Peter Karsten has pointed out in *The Naval Aristocracy*, the use of natural selection to demonstrate the superiority of a certain race or even an elite group was not unique to the U.S. Navy or to American society in general. Nor, was it the result of instruction in Darwinian theory at Annapolis. According to Karsten, it was the product of the application of a half-understood biological theory to social processes, a misalliance used to rationalize such varied phenomena as anti-Semitism and colonialism.³²⁷

Whites enlisting in the Navy in this period brought with them a hardening attitude toward African Americans, and white sailors no longer willingly slung hammocks alongside African Americans or ate with them. Looking back on his service in the U.S. Navy from 1892 to 1895, a former white sailor, George Steunenberg, observed that while at that time there might not have been “prejudice” against African Americans, “there certainly was a very strong objection against their presence in the ship.” He served on four different vessels during his time in the Navy and was sure that the objections to African Americans were strong on all of them. His contact with the sailors of other U.S. naval vessels caused him to conclude that prejudice against African American personnel pervaded the entire service. Steunenberg was convinced that “the presence of negroes was one of the most disagreeable features of naval service, and has as much to do

³²⁶ *Hearings before the House Naval Affairs Committee on Estimates of the Secretary of the Navy*, 1916, II, p. 2268.

³²⁷ Peter Karsten, *The Naval Aristocracy: The Golden Age of Annapolis and the Emergence of Modern American Navalism* (New York, 1972), p. 217; Cited hereafter as “Karsten”; *Annual Report of the Secretary of War*, 1880, part 2, pp. 229-230.

with causing desertions as any other feature.”³²⁸ Officials may have thought that just because white sailors did not mutiny or lodge formal complaints that they did not object to serving with African Americans. Steunenberg personally never knew of an official protest against African Americans, but he did know that white personnel objected to them and that the strongest objections came from those who had served the longest.³²⁹

In addition, Steunenberg contended that the presence of African Americans “was a constant source of dissatisfaction which often broke out in bloody fights.” The fights might not always have been the fault of African Americans but they did occur. As evidence he cited a “miniature race war” on the USS *Boston*, which “ended by the negroes running to the officers for protection.” Also, in 1894, aboard the USS *Charleston*, a ship that had a large number of African American crewmen, race relations were so bad that when an African American threw some coffee into a white man’s face, it started a huge fight between white and African American crewmembers. According to Steunenberg, “the deck was one mass of struggling men, and the fight waged so fiercely that the [shipboard] marines were called out to stop it and several of them had their rifles taken away from them before order was restored.” Additionally, on the old frigate USS *Independence* there was once “nothing less than an attempt to kill an insolent negro boasting that he could ‘lick any white son of a bitch in the ship.’”³³⁰

Steunenberg did not go as far as to say that every white man in the Navy was opposed to African Americans, but he did claim that the overwhelming majority were and that these feelings were not confined to personnel from the South. He was from a Northern state and had the

³²⁸ Lieutenant George Steunenberg, USA, “Negroes in the Navy.” In the *Army and Navy Journal*, January 19, 1907, volume 44, p. 563. Cited hereafter as “Steunenberg.”

³²⁹ Ibid.

³³⁰ Ibid.

impression that African Americans were "...more sinned against than sinning." Apparently, six months of naval service changed his mind:

When I hear a man advocate abolishing the color line in the Army, a measure that would affect thousands of helpless enlisted men, I can't help wishing that he would try it on himself. Let him serve with negroes as I have done; sling a hammock among them on a hot night; eat at the same mess-table with them; heave coal for a negro fireman. Then ask him his views on the color line.³³¹

Steunenberg's comments suggest that the relationship between the races aboard U.S. naval vessels underwent a gradual but radical change during the years between Appomattox and the Spanish-American War. Accepting the notion that whites would only take orders from members of their own race, the Navy withheld promotions from African Americans so that fewer of them became petty officers. Since assignment within the ship determined messing and berthing arrangements, naval authorities acceded to the racial polarization resulting from Jim Crow by concentrating African Americans in certain specialties that kept them isolated from the rest of the crew.³³²

After the Spanish American War there were approximately 500 African American men in the enlisted force of the U.S. Navy, serving on the same ships as white men and eating in the same mess facilities. The *Army and Navy Journal* called them "excellent sailors." African American sailors, however, complained that, although in the Spanish American War they had once again demonstrated their loyalty and ability, their chances of advancement in the service

³³¹ Ibid.

³³² Harrod, *Manning the New Navy*, pp. 10, 58.

were very poor as compared with those of white sailors, even whites with less education and skill.³³³

Nicholas Campbell, an African American sailor who served in the Navy at the turn of the century, thought that both races should share the blame for the Navy's racial problems. Campbell felt that part of the problem was that the Navy restricted African American men aboard ship to positions that were little more than servants: cooks and stewards. According to Campbell, the majority of his white comrades were "crackers" who did not hide their disdain for African Americans. He cited a serious clash aboard the receiving ship *Columbia* in 1902 as evidence of the tension between whites and African Americans. Campbell, however, had little enthusiasm for his African American shipmates; most of whom he felt attempted "to escape the responsibilities of civilian life, and who upon discovering that the [naval] service is [was] a bit strenuous, drift[ed] back into their customary state of careless negligence."³³⁴ He also observed that the U.S. Navy offered little future for the ambitious African American male:

His promotion to higher rates depends entirely upon the recommendation of officers through whose veins, in most cases, runs the poisonous blood of Negrophobia, with a baleful effect unimaginable. Sea and shore are alike in this particular for the representatives of our race. Filled with true patriotism for the country and the flag, he is a hero in time of war, and in peace suffers a caste prejudice more deadly than the poisonous fangs of the *fer-de-lance* [a venomous Central American snake].³³⁵

Campbell was more prophetic than he knew, for the new recruiting program instituted by the Navy in the early 1900s effectively excluded African Americans.

³³³ Foner, p. 83.

³³⁴ Nicholas H. Campbell, "The Negro in the Navy," *Colored American Magazine*, volume VI (May-June, 1903), p. 411. Cited hereafter as "Campbell."

³³⁵ *Ibid.*

No longer dependent on professional seamen and seeking a more homogeneous and educated pool of manpower, the Navy scattered recruiting stations across America's heartland, hoping to attract the farmboys and shop clerks seeking a chance to see the world. The new recruitment program proved to be a great success, for the Navy was able to acquire the type and numbers of men they were seeking. One of the first signs of the increasing restriction of African Americans was the Navy's edict in 1901 that African Americans should not be admitted as "landsmen for training," the new rating it had created for recruits without maritime experience. This policy supported the preference for an all-white force expressed by many recruiting officers. For example, in 1904, David J. Boyd, a New Orleans recruiter, refused to enlist African Americans because he claimed that accepting them would have made it difficult to enlist whites. Since orders from the Bureau of Navigation called for the enlisting only qualified and desirable men, the recruiting officer reasoned that he could reject African Americans because his "...experience with colored men on board ship places them in my [his] mind as less desirable than white men."³³⁶ The restrictive policies gradually weeded out ambitious African American men and only signed on those who would shovel coal or wait on officers. By 1906, African American representation in the Navy dropped to under 1,500 men in a total enlisted force of nearly 30,000, or less than 5%.³³⁷

In August 1903, a story was widely circulated in the press that the Navy Department would no longer enlist African Americans, and those who were still in the service would gradually be mustered out until what was left was an enlisted force composed exclusively of

³³⁶ David J. Boyd to Chief, Bureau of Navigation, April 12, 1904, No. 525-134, General Correspondence, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel, Record Group 24, National Archives.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

whites. In the opinion of many naval officials and officers, discipline and efficiency would be greatly improved by the elimination of African Americans. The promotion of African Americans was problematic as well, for white sailors resented being under the authority of African Americans. Not only were African Americans considered inferior sailors, white enlisted men were unhappy because they were placed in close proximity with African Americans aboard ship, were forced to associate with them, and were expected to treat them as equals.³³⁸ A veteran petty officer of twenty years wrote the following to the New York *Herald*:

It is indeed high time the [Navy] Department took some action in this matter. Among the many causes of discontent and desertion in the navy the presence of the Negro is the most potent.³³⁹

Soon thereafter the *Herald* published a reply from a correspondent who contended that, in view of the contributions African Americans had made to “some of the greatest naval victories in our history,” it would be a “backward step” for the nation to now say, “No room for you in the navy.” The Cleveland *Gazette* was more blunt: “Any disposition...to exclude Afro-Americans from the navy would be as criminal as it is unjust.”

Naval authorities emphatically denied their intention of eliminating African Americans from the service. The *Army and Navy Journal* agreed that such a step would be a “plain violation of the Federal Constitution.” It concurred with a number of naval officers who held that the solution to the problem of “race antipathy” was not the exclusion of African Americans but their consolidation into African American crews under white officers, as had been done in the Army, where the organization of African Americans into separate units had resolved “the

³³⁸ Ibid.

³³⁹ Ibid, p. 104.

racial question.” The *Army and Navy Journal* and these officers held that African Americans made good sailors and would be more useful and efficient if they were organized into separate crews. Such an arrangement would also give them opportunities for advancement that were mostly denied to them.

Lieutenant Commander T. P. Magruder, acknowledging the right of the African American citizen to enlist and conceding that he could become a competent and disciplined seaman, proposed setting aside certain ships for African Americans, just as the Army had done with four of its regiments. Except for officers and senior petty officers, the crews would consist of African Americans, along with “Hawaiians, Samoans, and Camorros [sic].” Such a plan, Magruder argued, would improve opportunities for promotion and ensure that the African American sailor would have “more company of his kind and be freed from the prejudice of a few of another color who may not be his superior physically or in the qualifications for the ratings they hold.”³⁴⁰ The plan ultimately adopted by the Navy was not to establish separate African American crews but increasingly to limit the presence of African Americans on board ship in ratings other than those of the messman’s branch.

The first step came during 1907-1908, as the Great White Fleet assembled at Hampton Roads, Virginia, in preparation for its round-the-world cruise. Japanese Americans on the West Coast suffered discrimination similar to that of African Americans in the civilian community, and Japanese sailors served in the U.S. Navy almost exclusively in the messman’s branch, the formalized specialty of galley workers and servants in the officer’s dining rooms established in 1893.

³⁴⁰ Lieutenant T.P. Magruder, “The Enlisted Personnel,” *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, vol. XXXVI (1910), pp. 385-386.

Unlike African Americans, Japanese Americans had the support of their country. After defeating Russia in 1905 and becoming a world power in contention with the United States and other countries for dominance in East Asia and the Western Pacific, Japan began expressing concern about the poor treatment of their countrymen in America. In response to Japan's growing influence, President Theodore Roosevelt dispatched a fleet of sixteen battleships, all built since the end of the Spanish American War, on a round-the-world cruise as a show of American military might. The ships, all painted white so they would be even more imposing, became known as the "Great White Fleet."

While the Great White Fleet assembled at Hampton Roads, Virginia, for the voyage, American naval leaders grew concerned about the number of Japanese messmen serving aboard the fleet. Some feared that the Japanese stewards might act as spies or even resort to sabotage. As a result, the Navy discharged the Japanese stewards and gave their jobs to African American sailors, regardless of the specialties in which they had trained. In the minds of American naval commanders, this action was good because it solved two of the Navy's problems: it eliminated the potential threat posed by Japanese personnel, and it locked African American personnel into the role of busboy and servant. One naval officer complained that the African Americans, plucked from their normal duties and pressed into service as personal servants, "...resented their assignments as waiters and busboys, and, as the months went by, would sometimes become so 'impudent' that they would have to be beaten." Anger caused by the demotion in status from real sailor to "seagoing servant" may have contributed to a fight between African American and white seamen at Cherbourg, France, one of those disturbances in which racial resentments

“...boil[ed] up like thunderheads and then subside[d].”³⁴¹

The lack of African American recruits and a decrease in African American reenlistments because of transfers to menial jobs steadily reduced the number of African Americans in the Navy. By the end of 1906, African American sailors numbered only 15,000 in the entire U.S. Navy. This was less than 5% of the total force. Over the next three years, the Navy transferred additional African American sailors to messmen and firemen positions until all but a few worked in the galleys and boiler rooms.³⁴²

In February 1909, the Great White Fleet returned, and the Navy removed all African American petty officers from the fleet and assigned them to shore duties. African Americans in the Navy shared the feelings of one of the transferred petty officers, Charles F. Parnell, who, after reporting to his duty on shore, wrote: “Every one of us was transferred. We knew that the end of a colored man being anything in the navy except a flunky had arrived.”³⁴³

In addition to restricting the positions of African Americans below decks, the Navy also made a conscious effort to prevent African American sailors from appearing in public. In the fall of 1909, naval crews paraded in New York City during the Hudson-Fulton centennial. The African American press was struck by the absence of African American seamen and charged that they were forbidden to participate. Soon thereafter, an article appeared in the *New York Age* in which officials of the Navy Department denied that there was “any studied attempt to discriminate” against African Americans. The explanation offered for the absence of African

³⁴¹ Robert A. Hart, *The Great White Fleet: Its Voyage Around the World, 1907-1909*, (Boston, 1965), pp. 56-57, 308.

³⁴² Lanning, p. 114.

³⁴³ Foner, pp. 104-105.

American sailors was that the deck crews (sailors, gunners, and so forth) were the only ones permitted to parade, and there were few African Americans in these ratings. It was further stated that the Navy was eager to enlist African Americans, even “giving them preference over white men...as messmen, stewards, cooks, and firemen.”³⁴⁴

The altered status of African American seamen was again highlighted on October 12, 1912, when not a single African American was to be seen among the 6,000 sailors who paraded in the National Naval Review in New York City. On April 12, 1913, a number of African American leaders in New York wrote to Secretary of the Navy, Josephus Daniels, charging discrimination against African Americans in the Navy. Secretary Daniels responded that careful consideration would be given to “the alleged [charges] of discrimination against colored men in the naval service.”³⁴⁵ The matter was then turned over to Rear Admiral Charles J. Badger, commander of the Atlantic Fleet.

On May 26, 1913, the *New York Times* reported: “Secretary of the Navy Daniels and Rear Admiral Charles J. Badger have completed an investigation of the charge of discrimination in the navy against colored enlisted men and find that the charge is unwarranted as there is no evidence of discrimination.” The admiral conceded that the only African Americans in the Navy were in the messman branch but pointed out there were also some white men in that branch and that neither African American nor white messmen were permitted to parade. The only sailors authorized to parade were those composing the deck and gun crews. Secretary Daniels dispatched the report to his New York correspondents along with a letter that read: “The [Navy]

³⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 105.

³⁴⁵ An account of an exchange of letters between Cleveland G. Allen and Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels, April 1913, *Army and Navy Journal*, vol. L, p. 1140.

department believes with Admiral Badger that you are misinformed as to the conditions of colored men in the navy.”³⁴⁶ On the eve of World War I, two men passed the navy test to become wireless operators. One, a white man, was accepted for this specialty, but the other, an African American, was informed that he was “eligible for the mess service only.”³⁴⁷

Despite their poor treatment and limited opportunities, African Americans actually fared better in the Navy than many senior politicians desired. Not content to allow African Americans to remain in the Navy only as messmen and firemen, many American politicians worked to eliminate African Americans from the Army and the Navy. In December 1906 Congressman John Nance Garner of Texas introduced a bill that called for the elimination of all African Americans currently serving in the military and for the barring of future African American enlistments. Garner introduced similar bills in each of the next three sessions of Congress. Other congressmen joined Garner’s crusade to rid the American military of African Americans. Every year between 1906 and 1916, someone introduced a bill that would eliminate the right of African Americans to serve. When these bills failed, their sponsors proposed legislation to prohibit African Americans from serving as non-commissioned officers in the Army and the Navy. The War Department, citing the past service of African Americans in time of great need, expressed opposition to each of these bills. As a result, none ever reached the floor for a vote. However, the introduction of the bills themselves reinforced doubts in the minds of African Americans that they could receive any degree of respect or equality in the military.

During Woodrow Wilson’s administration (1913-1921) it became clear that the implementation of progressive principles did not extend to equality between the races. President

³⁴⁶ “Colored Men in the Navy,” *New York Times*, May 26, 1913.

³⁴⁷ Foner, p. 106.

Wilson, a Virginian by birth and sympathetic to the principles of Jim Crow, did little to discourage the attempts of fellow Southerners to segregate the federal government. Various departments of the government “fed Jim Crow,” with the treasury and the post office leading the way. Whole agencies established separate working, eating, and restroom facilities for African Americans and whites, and the Civil Service Commission began requiring photographs of all applicants. President Wilson did not interfere with these measures and gave them his explicit approval.³⁴⁸ Sharp Northern criticisms forced President Wilson to tone down the more blatant examples of racism, but Washington, D.C. still had a distinctly “Southern” attitude about race relations.³⁴⁹ The whole Progressive Era (1890-1920), despite its extensive reforms addressing the problems of industrialization and urbanization, saw the continued decline of African Americans in general American society, as well as in the Navy.

In 1902, by force of arms and Congressional sanction, the Philippine Islands became a territory of the United States. Whatever the commercial advantages, the addition of the Philippines gave the U.S. Navy an excellent base for the projection of American military might in the far Pacific. The acquisition of the Philippine Islands also provided the Navy with a large supply of potential servants to fill its wardrooms. Naval officers felt that everything else being equal, a man of average or less-than-average height and build was “better suited for the duties of an officer’s servant than one six feet or over.”³⁵⁰ While less desirable than Chinese, Filipinos were still preferable to African Americans, and soon the Asians dominated the messman ratings

³⁴⁸ On federal racial policies during the Wilson era, see George C. Osborn, “The Problem of the Negro in Government, 1913,” *Historian* 23 (1961): 330-347, and Nancy J. Weiss, “The Negro and Segregation,” *Political Science Quarterly* 84 (1969): 61-79.

³⁴⁹ Arthur S. Link, *Woodrow Wilson and the Progressive Era, 1910-1917* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954), pp. 64-66.

³⁵⁰ Harrod, “Jim Crow in the Navy,” p. 52.

in the U.S. Navy. By 1914, Filipinos outnumbered African Americans in the U.S. Navy; by 1932, the ratio of Filipinos to African Americans was nearly ten to one.³⁵¹

By the time the United States entered World War I in 1917, the Navy's policy of restricting African Americans had produced a virtually segregated service. During the war, the Navy department rejected suggestions that it increase its enlistment of African Americans. Shortly after war was declared, a Minnesota congressman forwarded a letter from a member of the African American community who offered to aid in recruiting. The Bureau of Navigation refused his help and wrote:

The Bureau appreciates the patriotism of the negroes, but, as you can readily understand, it is not good policy for negroes to be enlisted as apprentice seamen and be required to live under the congested conditions which frequently prevail aboard ship and at training stations...In view of the fact that the Navy is obtaining enlistments in gratifying numbers, it is suggested that Mr. Smith direct his attention to the enlistment of men for the colored regiments in the Army.³⁵²

During World War I, Senator Joseph S. Frelinghuysen of New Jersey had questioned the Navy's policy of limiting shipboard positions for African Americans. Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels, a Southern Democrat from North Carolina, offered this explanation of the Navy's restrictive policy:

You are informed that there is no legal discrimination shown against colored men in the Navy. As a matter of policy, however, and to avoid friction between the two races, it has been customary to enlist colored men in the various ratings of the messmen branch; that is, cooks, stewards and mess attendants, and in the lower ratings of the fireroom [engine room]; thus permitting colored men to sleep and eat by themselves.³⁵³

³⁵¹ Harrod, *Manning the New Navy*, pp. 183-184.

³⁵² Bureau of Navigation to Thomas D. Schall, May 15, 1917, No. 5525-1447, General Correspondence, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel, Record Group 24, National Archives.

³⁵³ Harrod, "Jim Crow in the Navy," p. 52.

Such sensitivity to the needs of the African American sailor, expressed by Secretary Daniel's letter, failed to stop declining enlistments. During World War I, naval draftees expanded the Navy's enlisted force to 200,000, but only 3,200 were African American, less than 2% of the total navy force.³⁵⁴

Secretary Daniels wrote in his letter to Senator Frelinghuysen that African Americans were allowed in the lower engine-room ratings. The historical record suggests, however, that the Navy did not want them even in that position. Non-servant billets for African Americans were steadily reduced, and African Americans were increasingly confined to the messmen's branch. For example, in 1916 the Navy Department suggested renaming the "coal passer" rating "fireman, third class," because it thought that the designation "coal passer" hampered recruiting for the billet. Rear Admiral Victor Blue, chief of the Bureau of Navigation, was worried because men from the Midwest were not enlisting as coal-passers. It is clear that the Navy wished to man the engine-room force only with whites.³⁵⁵

During the entire period of World War I, the Navy accepted African Americans only as messmen and servants. An exception was made for a group of about thirty African American women who were enlisted as yeomanettes and employed in a segregated office in the Navy Department. On June 30, 1918, there were 5,328 African Americans in a navy totaling 435,398 men. The rank and file of these men were either messmen or attached to the fireroom forces as coal passers, although they often performed duties as yeomen on detail. A very limited number of African American sailors held petty office grades, with assignments as water tender,

³⁵⁴ Harrod, *Manning the New Navy*, p. 183.

³⁵⁵ House of Representatives, Committee on Naval Affairs, *Hearings, Estimates, Submitted by the Secretary of the Navy, 1916* (64th Congress, 1st session, 1916), 1: 928.

electrician, and gunner's mate. An article in *Our Navy*, a magazine devoted to the U.S. Navy's enlisted personnel, noted:

True, we have black petty officers here and there in the Navy, and in some cases black chief petty officers. It stands to reason that they must have been mighty good men to advance. They surely must know their business – every inch of it – to advance to these ratings, yet they are not wanted in these ratings because they involve the black man having charge of white men under him. Outside of the messman branch you will find comparatively few Negroes in the Navy today. ³⁵⁶

The inter-war period was especially difficult for African Americans, in uniform or out. African Americans from the South, who were drawn to Northern cities when World War I had created a demand for industrial labor, met rising hostility during the peacetime recession of the economy. Burgeoning African American ghettos, rising unemployment, and the unmet expectations of military personnel of both races returning from overseas, produced a volatile atmosphere. In 1919, racial antagonism erupted in twenty-two American cities; in a Chicago riot, thirty-eight people were killed, and over 500 were injured. ³⁵⁷

The restrictions on the enlistment and assignment of African Americans, under way before World War I, continued afterward. By 1919, Jim Crow had indeed permeated the Navy, for in the summer of that year the Navy refused to accept any more first enlistments by African Americans. Those already in the service might reenlist, but many of the veterans who had become petty officers and specialized in engine-room duties or even gunnery, were reaching retirement age and leaving the service. Also, postwar demobilization was in process, so that many of the vacancies caused by the departure of African Americans need not be filled. If

³⁵⁶ Foner, p. 124.

³⁵⁷ Richard Hofstadter and Michael Wallace, eds. *American Violence, A Documentary History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), p. 246.

essential openings did occur, except among the stewards or messmen, whites were promoted into them. By the end of 1941, the Navy had just twenty-nine African Americans who were not messmen, and all but six had been summoned from retirement to serve during the national emergency.³⁵⁸

During the time that new enlistments by African Americans were forbidden, the number of African American messmen declined rapidly, as did the total in the enlisted force. By 1932, only 441 of the small peacetime service were African American; the lowest total in U.S. naval history. In the meantime, because so few messmen were needed, the Navy had in December 1930 suspended first enlistments by Filipinos. The demand soon increased, however, for new ships were being designed and built in order to fight the Great Depression, if not a specific armed enemy, by creating jobs in the nation's shipyards.³⁵⁹

In seeking recruits for an ever-growing messman's branch, the Navy found Filipinos less attractive than before. Congress was planning to grant the islands their eventual independence, and even in a transitional commonwealth status the Philippines would prove an uncertain source of recruits if the United States should ever go to war against Japan. In December 1932, the Bureau of Navigation decided to reopen the messman's branch to African Americans, a position that one African American described as "waiters and bellhops going to sea."³⁶⁰ Reversing a navy policy that had been in effect since 1919, the director of enlisted personnel recommended that these new enlistments be made within the "Continental United States from men of negro blood." He argued that in case of war, especially a conflict in the Pacific, it would be difficult to

³⁵⁸ Harrod, *Manning the New Navy*, p. 164.

³⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 184.

³⁶⁰ Foner, p. 131.

maintain lines of communication to the Philippines for new messmen; furthermore, Congress seemed likely to grant the Philippine islands their independence in 1947.³⁶¹

In the discussion within the Bureau of Navigation that followed, some naval officers asserted that Filipinos were superior servants and that recruiting African Americans once again would “be a distinct step backwards.”³⁶² Most officers, though, agreed that African Americans were the most suitable group to replace Filipinos as the “chambermaids of the braid.”³⁶³ Not just any African American would do, though. Naval officers preferred African Americans from the South because “...by training and environment the Southern colored man has inherited a servant’s point of view and is usually contented and happy in that position.”³⁶⁴ African American recruits from the areas of the urban North were not desired, since, they were, as one naval officer wrote, “...apt to be independent, insolent, and over-educated” and therefore unsuitable to play the “lackey” sought by the service.³⁶⁵ Thus the majority favored recruiting in the South to obtain the “unspoiled young negro.”³⁶⁶

³⁶¹ Captain Abram Claude, Memorandum for Chief Bureau of Navigation, October 18, 1932, No. NC66 (1), General Correspondence, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel, Record Group 24, National Archives.

³⁶² Commander R. R. M. Emmett, Memorandum for Captain Noyes, October 19, 1932, No. NC66(1), General Correspondence, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel, Record Group 24, National Archives.

³⁶³ L.D. Reddick, “The Negro in the United States Navy during World War II,” *The Journal of Negro History*, 32, (1947), p. 203.

³⁶⁴ D.A. Weaver to Captain Abram Claude, November 28, 1932, No. NC66(1), General Correspondence, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel, Record Group 24, National Archives.

³⁶⁵ H.S. Gearing, Memorandum for Captain Claude, December 2, 1932, No. NC66(1), General Correspondence, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel, Record Group 24, National Archives.

³⁶⁶ Ibid. See also under the same file number A. W. Johnson, Memorandum for Chief of the Bureau of Navigation, November 8, 1932, and W. T. Cluverius to Captain Abram Claude, November 25, 1932. According to the historical record, African Americans took advantage of this opportunity, their numbers rose from 441 in 1932 to 4,007 in June 1940, when they constituted 2.3% of the Navy’s 170,000 total. See Memorandum, H.A. Badt, Bureau of Navigation, for Officer in Charge, Public Relations, July 24, 1940, subject: Negroes in the U.S. Navy, Nav-641, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel.

Following these recommendations, the Bureau of Navigation resumed the enlistment of African Americans on January 3, 1933, and opened a school at Hampton Roads, Virginia, to train recruits in the duties of a mess attendant, third class.³⁶⁷ In order to insure the enlistment of the “proper” type of African Americans, the Bureau of Navigation limited the stations that were given quotas for African American mess attendants. At first, enlistments were confined to a few southern cities.³⁶⁸ Later, the Bureau assigned quotas to other areas but continued to give the South the lion’s share. When recruiting was allowed only in the South, an applicant from another area was permitted to take a preliminary examination at a station near his home, but he had to travel at his own expense to a station authorized to accept enlistments in the rating, usually located in a city near the mess attendant school.³⁶⁹ This practice, though it was adopted to reduce transportation costs for the Navy, shows clearly that African Americans from the North were discouraged.

Although African Americans were limited by naval policy to the messmen branch in the 1930s, it was not explained to them when they enlisted. The N.A.A.C.P. (the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) received numerous complaints from African American enlistees that recruiting officers had said that any specialty was open to them

³⁶⁷ Chief, Bureau of Navigation to Commanding Officer, Naval Training Station, Norfolk, Virginia, December 17, 1932, No. NC66 (1), General Correspondence, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel, Record Group 24, National Archives.

³⁶⁸ The first monthly quotas were as follows: Macon, Georgia, 2; Raleigh, North Carolina, 2; Richmond, Virginia, 2; Birmingham, Alabama, 2; Little Rock, Arkansas, 2; and Nashville, Tennessee, 2. Chief, Bureau of Navigation, to Commanding Officer, Naval Training Station Norfolk, Virginia, December 6, 1932, No. NC66 (1), General Correspondence, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel, Record Group 24, National Archives.

³⁶⁹ William D. Leahy, Chief of the Bureau of Navigation to A. C. MacNeal, June 3, 1935, No. P14-4(746), General Correspondence, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel, Record Group 24, National Archives.

and that training was available. Upon reporting to the training stations, however, African American enlistees found that they “...were segregated into one branch.”³⁷⁰

During the 1930s, many naval officers expressed their displeasure with the performance of African American personnel. In a letter to the Chief of the Bureau of Navigation, the executive officer of the *Wyoming* wrote:

I believe that any negro who is a good servant is the exception and that he compares only favorably with the average oriental servant. Generally, the negro is lazy, slow thinking, and slow acting. He is dirty about his person. He does his work in a slovenly fashion and requires constant supervision for even routine matters. He has a distorted idea of truthfulness and honesty. He has an abnormal appetite and eats whenever he can lay his hands on food...He is more easily susceptible to colds, influenza and other respiratory diseases than other members of the crew.³⁷¹

The average size of African Americans compared to Filipinos also was commented upon in the 1930s. One officer noted the “great number of large mess attendants reaching the Fleet,” the amount of food they consumed, and “the unmilitary appearance generally presented.” He felt that, everything else being equal, a man of average or less than average height and build was “better suited for the duties of an officer’s servant than one six feet or over.”³⁷²

Dissatisfaction with African American mess attendants produced a desire to return to the more acceptable Asians. Since it seemed impossible at the time to continue enlisting Filipinos, the Navy began enlisting Chamorros, residents of Guam, an American possession. On July 1,

³⁷⁰ H. J. Williams to Walter White, October 26, 1936, and November 12, 1936, C3-77, Administrative Files, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Papers, Library of Congress.

³⁷¹ Executive Officer, USS *Wyoming*, to Chief, Bureau of Navigation, May 21, 1935, No. MB (154), General Correspondence, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel, Record Group 24, National

³⁷² Commander Base Force to Chief, Bureau of Navigation, February 27, 1938, No. MB(188), General Corr., Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel, Record Group 24, National Archives.

1937, it assigned Guam a monthly quota of ten mess attendants, third class, and later increased the number to fifteen. Officers in the Navy responded enthusiastically to the Chamorros.³⁷³

During the 1930s suggestions to resume the enlistment of Filipinos continued. Captain Jesse B. Oldendorf recommended a distribution in the messmen branch of 60% Filipinos, 15% Chamorro, and 25% African Americans, but because independence was planned for the islands, the legality of enlisting Filipinos prevented the Navy from adopting such a policy. Not until after World War II did the Navy obtain the Filipino stewards it coveted, when an agreement with the Republic of the Philippines, which became independent in 1946, permitted citizens of the Philippine islands to enlist as messmen.³⁷⁴

The renewed acceptance of African Americans in the messman branch failed to affect the Navy's determination to exclude African Americans from other parts of the service. During the 1930s, a number of inquiries appeared concerning the Navy's exclusionary policy. The responses to most inquiries were the same. For example, in a letter to A. C. MacNeal, the president of the Chicago branch of the N.A.A.C.P., the Bureau of Navigation wrote:

After many years of experience the policy of not enlisting men of the colored race for the seaman and other branches of the Naval Service, except the messman branch, was adopted to meet the best interest of general ship efficiency. Experience in former years has shown clearly that men of the colored race, if enlisted in the seaman branch and promoted to the position of petty officers, cannot maintain discipline among the men of

³⁷³ Chief, Bureau of Navigation to Governor of Guam, May 8, 1937, N. MB(187), General Correspondence, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel, Record Group 24, National Archives. Bureau of Navigation to CINCUS, CINCAF, COMBASEFOR, June 4, 1938, No. MB (187), General Correspondence, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel, Record Group 24, National Archives.

³⁷⁴ Memorandum for Chief of Bureau from Captain J. B. Oldendorf, July 25, 1938, No. MB(209), General Correspondence, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel, Record Group 24, National Archives. Agreement between the U.S. and the Republic of the Philippines, December 13, 1952, in U.S. Department of State, *United States Treaties and Other International Agreements* (Washington, GPO, 1955), volume 5, pp. 373-378.

the white race over whom they may be placed by reason of their rating, and that as a result team work, harmony, and ship efficiency are seriously handicapped.³⁷⁵

The Navy justified its action by the existence of white prejudice, assuming that the correctness of its policy was apparent to all.

Despite the previous objections by naval officers, the number of African American messmen increased tenfold between 1933 and 1940 and the naval expansion begun in response to the Great Depression, intensified with the approach of another world war. Once again, the Navy turned to African Americans to perform a task that others had shunned. The job the Navy offered to African Americans was unattractive, not because it was dangerous or it caused loneliness as it did in the days of the Old Navy, but because few Americans wanted to become seagoing servants.³⁷⁶

Limitations on African American enlistees extended beyond their assignment as mess attendants. The 2,807 African American enlisted men in the Navy on June 30, 1939, had no opportunities to learn the many trades provided in the naval training program or to become combat seamen. Although recruits of both races received twenty-one dollars a month after they had enlisted, African Americans, rated as mess attendants third class, were not eligible for promotion or the resultant pay raise during their first year in the naval service. On the other hand, a white recruit could be promoted every three months and by the end of a year could

³⁷⁵ Rear Admiral Adolphus Andrews, Chief, Bureau of Navigation, to A. C. MacNeal, September 19, 1935, P14-4(770), General Correspondence, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel, Record Group 24, National Archives.

³⁷⁶ Memorandum, Captain H. A. Badt, USN, for the Officer in Charge, Public Relations, July 24, 1940, subject: Negroes in the U.S. Navy, volume IV, item 187.

become a petty officer receiving a monthly pay of fifty-four dollars. There were 19,477 naval commissioned and warrant officers, but not one of them was African American.³⁷⁷

The Navy also managed to maintain its all-white officer corps. In an active navy that accepted African Americans only as servants in the mess and as help in the kitchen, no opportunity existed for an African American sailor to pursue a direct commission. The only other avenue to achieve officer rank remained Annapolis, but it had not accepted an African American appointee since 1873 and had never graduated an African American midshipman. Many African American leaders felt that the mission of the Naval Academy, to develop leaders with a “potential for future development in mind and character to assume the highest responsibilities of command, citizenship, and government,” conformed exactly to what they wanted for young African Americans. Finally, their lobbying once again opened Annapolis to the African American midshipman, but only briefly and with negative results.³⁷⁸

On June 15, 1936, for the first time in sixty-one years, an African American, James Lee Johnson, Jr., of Illinois, was admitted to the Naval Academy. Johnson resigned from Annapolis in 1937 because of academic deficiencies, and African Americans explained his resignation by claiming that “it was the cold atmosphere of ostracism that floored the youth,” rather than “alleged academic failures.” George J. Trivers was appointed to the Naval Academy on June 16, 1937, and resigned on July 7, 1937, because of poor grades in deportment and English. Both men suffered from severe hazing from white midshipmen, and at least some of the white faculty discriminated against them in the classroom.³⁷⁹ Eight years were to elapse before another

³⁷⁷ Foner, p. 132.

³⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 159.

³⁷⁹ Ibid.

African American would be admitted to the Naval Academy.

As World War II loomed, the American military faithfully reflected the worst racial excesses of American society. It was a mirror reflection that contained ominous portents. Writing in the *Crisis*, the official publication of the NAACP, in March 1939, one anonymous observer warned:

Judging from prevailing Jim Crow practices in the armed forces of the United States today, the next war...will see the same gross maltreatment of the Negro soldiers seen in the World War. For today Negroes are barred from the newer arms of the service, including aviation and other branches; Negroes may serve in the U.S. Navy only as menials...Negro regular army soldiers are kept out of active service...These are but a few of the many discriminations.³⁸⁰

The article in the *Crisis* concluded that these discriminatory practices not only prevented equality but also endangered the security of the United States. It warned, "Such a policy is contrary, not only to decency, but to the security and well-being of the American government."³⁸¹ World War II would prove these views correct.

³⁸⁰ Anonymous, "Jim Crow in Uniform," *Crisis*, March 1939.

³⁸¹ Ibid.

Chapter 6 - World War II Was Critical

Discrimination against African American naval personnel persisted into the era of the Second World War era, but the demands of a global war and the pressures of a more vocal civil rights movement resulted, at last, in far greater opportunities for advancement and integration. What allowed these changes to persist beyond the surrender of the Axis powers, however, was the groundwork the wartime policy changes laid in the form of an awakening consciousness of racial equality among the white members of the U.S. Navy.

The status of African American servicemen reflected the changing patterns in American race relations. African American men served in the Navy since the French and Indian War, but following the First World War, the Navy attempted to exclude African Americans altogether, replacing them with Filipino stewards. African American enlisted men were still limited in numbers and were relegated to the most menial tasks at the time of Pearl Harbor. By the time the war had ended, the Navy had commissioned its first African American officers, experimented with a few ships manned mostly by African Americans, and begun integrating the races in the crews of fleet auxiliaries such as oilers and ammunition ships. World War II was truly “the” critical period for the integration of the U.S. Navy because it forced the Navy to change its racial policy and racial attitudes, the seedbed for all the more quantifiable and better known progress in integration in the postwar years.

Although the United States had begun to rearm by 1940, the Navy still had no interest in recruiting African Americans except for an expanding messman’s branch. In June 1940, as Nazi Germany was conquering France, only 4,007 African Americans were serving in the Navy, most

of them as messmen.³⁸²

Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox ignored the efforts of persons outside the naval establishment, whether politicians or champions of civil rights, who were trying to persuade the Navy to recruit additional African Americans for naval duty rather than housekeeping. Knox insisted that his actions were for the benefit of African Americans, sparing them the embarrassment of having to compete against whites on equal terms. He was convinced that “it is no kindness to Negroes to thrust them upon men of the white race,” and he suggested that the African American might make his major contribution to the U.S. armed forces in the Army’s African American regiments.³⁸³

The Navy’s General Board, a body comparable to a general staff in its responsibility for the formation of Navy policy, suggested that Knox respond to the criticisms of the Navy’s racial policy by pointing out that “colored men are now enlisted in the messman branch...and given every opportunity for advancement to cooks and stewards.” These grades enabled them to earn the same pay as petty officers, though they could not exercise authority outside their branch. “Experience of many years in the Navy,” the General Board observed, “has shown clearly that men of the colored race, if enlisted in any other branch than the messman’s branch, and promoted to the position of petty officer, cannot maintain discipline among men of the white race over whom they may be placed by reason of their rating.”³⁸⁴

³⁸² Memorandum, H. A. Badt, Bureau of Navigation, for the Officer in Charge, Public Relations, 24 July 1940, subject: Negroes in the Navy, Nav-641, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel.

³⁸³ Letter, Secretary of the Navy (Knox) to Senator Arthur Capper (Kansas), 1 August 1940, QN/P14-4, General Records of the Department of the Navy.

³⁸⁴ Letter, Secretary of the Navy (Knox) to Lt. Governor, Charles Poletti (New York), 24 July 1940, Nav-620-AT, General Records of the Department of the Navy.

The threat of an African American protest, and the implied promise of the African American community's support of Franklin D. Roosevelt and his policies, had a number of positive effects. The president appointed several prominent African American leaders to positions of authority in the government, and the War Department promised broader opportunities for African Americans in the Army Air Corps. However, the U.S. Navy clung to its existing policy of segregated and restricted service for African Americans.

Even after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the Navy would not modify its racial policies. Germany and Italy eventually joined forces with Japan, but Secretary Knox continued to resist pressure from the White House to change the Navy's racial policies. He either ignored the President's wishes or responded with predictions of disaster if the status quo were changed.

At the time of Pearl Harbor, the five thousand or so African American sailors on active duty were restricted to working as mess attendants, and there were no African American officers. African American organizations objected and pressured President Roosevelt and the Navy to end enlistment restrictions for African Americans. Secretary Knox and the Navy's General Board continued to resist the efforts of the president. According to the General Board, "Racism was too deeply embedded in general American society to permit the integration of the Navy and the white man will not accept the African American in a position of authority over him." President Roosevelt wanted another answer, and finally the General Board agreed that the Navy might make use of African American units aboard harbor craft and shore installations. On April 7, 1942, Knox announced the admittance of African Americans into the Navy's general service.³⁸⁵

³⁸⁵ Memorandum, Admiral W. R. Sexton, Chairman of the General Board, to Secretary of the Navy (Knox), February 3, 1942, subject: Enlistment of Men of Colored Race in Other Than Messman Branch, Operational Archives Branch, Naval Historical Center, Washington D.C.

The decision to admit African Americans into the general ratings, however, did not commit the Navy to a program of integration. Secretary Knox emphasized that these volunteers would receive basic and advanced training in segregated camps and schools established by the Navy around the country, be grouped in separate units, and not be assigned to seagoing combat vessels. Instead, they would serve at shore installations and on harbor craft, in construction crews, and in labor battalions based outside the continental United States. Also, white petty officers would command the African American units until African American petty officers could be trained. There would be no African Americans commissioned as officers. Nevertheless, for the first time in American naval history, African American sailors entered the Navy as electricians, shipfitters, radiomen, and a number of other skilled ratings.

The recruiting of African Americans began in earnest in June 1942. A separate area for African American recruits was established at the Great Lakes Naval Training Center in Illinois. The recruits, all apprentice seamen, were under the command of Lieutenant Commander Daniel W. Armstrong, an Annapolis graduate and son of the founder of Hampton Institute, a vocational training school in Virginia. Two other camps for the exclusive use of African American recruits, Camp Moffett and Camp Lawrence, were eventually added at Great Lakes. Segregated advanced training schools were also operated for African American seamen at Camp Robert Smalls, named for the African American naval hero of the Civil War, and at Hampton Institute. At these schools, African American recruits who had completed eight weeks of basic training and qualified for advanced instruction were trained as technical specialists. Recruits who did not qualify for naval vocational schools were assigned to sea duty, ammunition depots, or the Great Lakes Training Center's operating center.

The Navy contended that its assignment policy ensured that individual jobs would be filled on the basis of rating and ability. African American critics complained, however, that, in practice, race was the determining factor in job assignments and other areas as well. They pointed out that very few African Americans held positions at sea except as servants. The Navy refused to assign African Americans to gun crews and battle stations. The advancement of African American personnel was slow or, in most cases, nonexistent. Petty officer ratings were withheld from African Americans, and African Americans were not trained to become commissioned officers. There were no African American chaplains and no African Americans at Annapolis, nor had any African Americans been admitted to the naval aviation branch except as service workers and mess attendants. Finally, very few African Americans who had passed their courses at the training schools were permitted to work in their specialties. The Navy assigned almost all African Americans to segregated jobs as construction workers or as laborers and stevedores at ammunition and supply depots, where, regardless of their training and qualifications, they worked in gangs handling ammunition and loading and unloading ships under the supervision of white petty officers.

In response to continuing pressure from African American organizations and press and the mounting protests of African American seamen, the Navy took steps to improve the status of their African American personnel. These changes were carried forward under the direction of Admiral Randall Jacobs, Chief of Naval Personnel, and his successor, Admiral Louis Denfield. African Americans assigned to naval ammunition depots were limited to 30% of the African American enlisted men in the Navy. In the early months of 1944, a special training unit for illiterate African American recruits was organized at Camp Robert Smalls. Fifteen thousand

men passed through this school, an achievement one historian has characterized as “unprecedented and unmatched.”³⁸⁶

The Navy might well have maintained racial segregation by enlisting only as many African Americans as could be employed as messmen or assigned to separate, quasi-independent organizations such as the new Naval Construction Battalions (CBs, or “Seabees”). The manpower needs created by a global conflict caused the president to decree that the War Manpower Commission, not the military, would decide how many African Americans the services would induct through the Selective Service system.

African Americans began entering the Navy by the thousands. The Navy summarily increased the number of messmen, organized more construction battalions for African Americans, and established base units in which African Americans served as stevedores. Most of the African Americans serving in 1943 functioned as laborers at ports, bases, or ammunition depots in the United States or abroad. Most African American sailors performed non-combat duties, even the mess attendants on board warships. Forced into a narrow range of specialties, African American sailors saw themselves as outsiders from the real Navy, serving as workers rather than fighters. African American leaders complained bitterly about this situation, saying that the only advancement had been in African American sailors trading their waiter aprons for carpenter hammers and stevedore hooks.³⁸⁷

The influx of African American enlisted personnel dramatized their absence in the naval officer corps. No African American had ever received a commission in the 150 years of the

³⁸⁶ Jack D. Foner, *Blacks and the Military in American History: A New Perspective*, (New York: Praeger, 1974), p.169.

³⁸⁷ Michael Lee Lanning, *The African American Soldier: From Crispus Attucks to Colin Powell*, (New Jersey: Carol Publishing Group, 1997), pp. 200-201.

Navy's existence, but in September 1943, Assistant Secretary of the Navy Adlai Stevenson, who later distinguished himself as governor of Illinois, two-time candidate for president, and ambassador to the United Nations during the Cuban Missile Crisis, believed that it was time for a change. Twelve African Americans were already enrolled during 1943 and 1944 at various colleges in the V-12 officer-training program, the precursor of the Naval Reserve Officer Training Corps that which combined university education and officer training. Stevenson proposed accelerating the process by commissioning ten or twelve African Americans selected from among "top notch civilians just as we procure white officers" and a few from the ranks. Stevenson believed that the commissioning of these men should be treated as a matter of course without any special publicity. "The news," he added wryly, "would get out soon enough."³⁸⁸

Instead, the Bureau of Naval Personnel chose officer candidates from among African American sailors who were already on duty. Of the sixteen candidates who entered an accelerated program of training in January 1944, twelve became ensigns in the Naval Reserve on March 17. Another of the candidates became a warrant officer because he lacked a college education. It was not until the thirteen graduates held a reunion in 1977 that they dubbed themselves the "Golden Thirteen."

None of the twelve line officers was assigned to duty outside of the United States. Six were stationed aboard patrol craft or tug boats in Boston, New York Harbor, and Treasure Island in San Francisco, and six remained at Great Lakes Station performing unimportant jobs in the recruit training section at Camp Robert Smalls. They were also segregated and forbidden to use the station's officers' club by order of Commander Daniel Armstrong, who claimed he feared

³⁸⁸ Memorandum, Adlai E. Stevenson for the Secretary of the Navy (Knox), 29 September 1943, Navy and Old Navy Branch, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

racial tension if socializing with white officers were permitted. After six months, the African American officers at Camp Smalls submitted a request for membership in the officers' club. Commander Armstrong rejected their application, saying that he was acting under the order of the base commandant, Commodore Robert R. Emmet, who later granted unconditional permission for the African American officers to have access to the club facilities.³⁸⁹

In time, other line officers graduated from the Navy's V-12 officer candidate schools, where they were trained in racially mixed groups. Once they were commissioned, they were assigned to the Navy Department in Washington, D.C., and aboard small craft. By September 1945, the number of African American male commissioned officers had increased from twelve to fifty-two (fifteen line and thirty-seven staff officers), as compared to more than 70,000 white officers. These African American officers held their commissions in the Naval Reserve Corps and not the regular Navy. All but five eventually saw duty overseas. With but one exception, they had no real authority and were given jobs that did not correspond to their experience and training. The exception was Ensign Dennis D. Nelson, who commanded a logistics support unit, including white and African American officers, at Eniwetok. Promotions for African American officers were virtually non-existent. Only one African American line officer reached the rank of full lieutenant by the end of the war, and only one African American was admitted to the Naval Academy in wartime, two months before the Japanese surrendered.³⁹⁰ The Navy had finally commissioned the first African American naval officers in its history.

Since the inception of African American enlistment, there had been those in the Bureau of Naval Personnel who argued for the establishment of a group to coordinate plans and policies

³⁸⁹ Lanning, pp. 170-171.

³⁹⁰ Ibid, p. 171.

on the training and use of African American sailors. Various proposals were considered, but only in the wake of the racial disturbances of 1943 did the bureau set up a Special Programs Unit in its Planning and Control Activity to oversee the whole African American enlistment program. Special Programs Unit members Captain Thomas F. Darden and Lieutenant Commanders Charles E. Dillon, Donald G. Van Ness, and Christopher Sargent arranged for a leadership course at Great Lakes to prepare graduates for promotion to petty officer. The Bureau of Naval Personnel went so far as to permit the promotion of qualified African Americans to petty officer even if specific openings did not yet exist.

Because Secretary Knox still favored separating the races, African American sailors would have to serve on specified ships under the command of white officers and petty officers. As a result, the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Ernest J. King, in January 1944, ordered the assignment of 196 African American sailors and forty-four white officers and petty officers to the destroyer escort USS *Mason* and fifty-three African American seamen and fourteen white officers and petty officers to the submarine chaser *PC 1264*. Another four submarine chasers later joined in this experiment. Gradually, African American petty officers replaced their white counterparts, and some African American officers were assigned as they became available.³⁹¹

African American officers and men served most of World War II in segregated vessels, and it was not until the war's last year that African Americans were given the opportunity to serve aboard integrated ships. On April 28, 1944, Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox, who had been reluctant to support any advancement of African Americans, died, and the president

³⁹¹ Morris J. Macgregor, Jr., *Integration of the Armed Forces, 1940-1965*, (Washington, D.C.: Center for Military History, 1989), pp. 77-78.

replaced him with Under Secretary of the Navy James V. Forrestal. Under his tenure, the pace of integrating the Navy accelerated.

Forrestal was a prewar investment banker who had been an active member in the National Urban League. The new Secretary of the Navy believed in equality for all Americans as well as the practical notion that segregation had a detrimental effect on morale and was economically impractical. In July 1944, Secretary Forrestal abandoned the Navy's segregated advanced-training schools for African Americans, declaring that they did not "consider practical the establishment of separate facilities and quotas for African Americans who qualified for advanced training." Recruit training, however, remained segregated. One month later, African Americans were assigned as 10% of the general crews of twenty-five selected auxiliary ships (oilers, tankers, and cargo vessels). In a memorandum to the president, Forrestal explained that if this experiment in integration worked, he planned to expand it to other types of ships.³⁹²

Forrestal's decision affected only 2% of the 75,000-ship fleet. Nevertheless, his decision was a momentous one with repercussions for the whole Navy. The limited integration of the Navy's auxiliary ships proved extremely successful. Satisfied with the results of this experiment and facing continual manpower shortages for the expanding fleet, the Navy, in April 1945, opened all 1,600 auxiliary vessels to African American sailors; the only restriction remaining was that African Americans could not exceed 10% of the total crew. Two months later, the Navy announced the end of segregated basic training. Beginning in June 1945, all enlistees reported to the nearest training center regardless of their skin color.³⁹³

³⁹² Lee Nichols, *Breakthrough on the Color Front*, (New York: Random House, 1954), pp. 58-59.

³⁹³ Lanning, p. 209.

Despite the advancements in equality in the final months of World War II, few African American sailors actually received the opportunity either to train as officers or to serve aboard the USS *Mason* or the *PC-1264*, or in the auxiliary fleet. The vast majority of African Americans labored in ammunition handling or construction units.

While the Navy's experiment of integrating ships' crews may have proved successful, African Americans did not always accept the discrimination or lack of opportunity. The most significant protest by African American sailors took place after the huge explosion of two ammunition ships at the Navy's Port Chicago Ammunition Depot at Mare Island, California, on July 17, 1944, which killed over two hundred African American ammunition handlers. When loading operations resumed aboard new ships a few days later, 258 African American sailors refused to work, citing racism, inadequate training, and a lack of safety provisions for the dangerous duty. All but forty-four were persuaded to return to duty; those who refused were court-martialed for mutiny and received sentences of eight to fifteen years at hard labor, to be followed by dishonorable discharges. After the war, the Navy, reacting to the public outcry over the incident, reduced the proportion of African Americans handling ammunition. In January 1946, after hard lobbying by the African American press, attorney and future Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, and the NAACP, the Navy set aside the convictions and returned the men to duty.³⁹⁴

Forrestal was convinced that the only answer to the disturbances like the one at Port Chicago was integration. In March 1945, he appointed Lester B. Granger, former executive secretary of the National Urban League, as his civilian aide to monitor the implementation of the

³⁹⁴ MacGregor, Jr., p. 92.

Navy's racial policy. Over a period of six months in 1945, Granger traveled fifty thousand miles and visited sixty-seven naval facilities throughout the world. Forrestal saw that action was taken on practically every one of the suggestions made by Granger for better treatment of African American sailors.³⁹⁵

Paralleling the efforts to improve the status of African American men in the U.S. Navy was a drive to get the Navy to accept African American women. The Navy Department regarded the WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service), which had been created in 1942, as an all-white unit whose members would replace white sailors ashore. Civilian organizations such as the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority and the Congress of Women's Auxiliaries for the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) applied steady pressure on the Navy to change its policy. These groups rejected both the assumption that African American women could replace only African American men and that any women's reserve unit should be segregated. Finally capitulating to these groups, the Navy announced in 1944 that it would admit African American to the WAVES. Furthermore, the Navy adopted integrated training and assignments for women.³⁹⁶

Additionally, the use of the draft as a source of manpower, as well as the Navy's new attitude towards integration, combined to force other components of the naval establishment, namely the Marine Corps and the Coast Guard, to develop their own racial policies. The Marine Corps had always been able to reject the services of African Americans because of its small size. Moreover, the role of the Marines in maintaining order and discipline on board ship and at shore

³⁹⁵ Lester Granger, "Racial Democracy - The Navy Way," *Common Ground*, 7 (Winter, 1947), pp. 61-68.

³⁹⁶ Frederick S. Harrod, "Integration of the Navy (1941-1978)," *United States Naval Institute Proceedings*, (October 1979), pp. 44-45.

installations enabled the Corps to invoke the long-held presumption that whites would not take orders from African Americans. Changing American societal attitudes and manpower demands forced the Corps to break its 167-year old ban on African American enlistment, and on June 1, 1942, the Corps began enlisting African Americans. The Marines agreed to accept a small number of African American inductees, but, like the U.S. Army, organized them into segregated units. Three months later, the first group of 1,200 volunteers from all sections of the country began their training at the 51st Composite Defense Battalion at Montford Point, Camp Lejeune – Mammoth Marine Training Reservation at New River, North Carolina. Marine Corps Headquarters then announced plans to recruit 10,000 African Americans.³⁹⁷

Following seven weeks of basic training, the African American recruits selected a branch of service. As a result, some received training in anti-aircraft and artillery, communications, machine gun and small artillery. Others chose headquarters transport, personnel, depot, and steward work. Regardless of their choice, all of the African American marines received weapons training, which was standard practice for the Corps. In November 1942, the Corps began enlisting African Americans to train as occupational specialists: accountants, telephone operators, radio maintenance and repairmen, electricians, warehouse men, machinists, clerks, musicians, truck drivers, mechanics, cooks and bakers. The Marine Corps eventually recruited for wartime service more than 19,000 African Americans.³⁹⁸

The U.S. Coast Guard had accepted African Americans long before the Second World War. Most manned remote life-saving stations, served at isolated lighthouses, or performed

³⁹⁷ John W. Davis, “The Negro in the United States Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard,” *Journal of Negro Education*, Volume 12, Issue 3, The American Negro in World War I and World War II (Summer 1943), p. 348.

³⁹⁸ Nalty, and MacGregor, pp. 133-134.

duties in the Coast Guard's messman branch. In January 1942, the Commandant of the U.S. Coast Guard, Rear Admiral Russell R. Waesche, enlisted 500 African Americans into the Coast Guard, which was controlled by the Navy during World War II. Admiral Waesche assigned the African American coastguardsmen to small craft or port security detachments and allowed them to compete for promotion to petty officer. The chairman of the Navy's General Board, Vice Admiral Walton R. Sexton, objected to these measures because he felt that the influx of even 500 African Americans might prevent the comparatively small Coast Guard from maintaining racial segregation. Nonetheless, the first of these African American recruits began their training at the U.S. Training Station at Manhattan Beach, California, in the spring of 1942. These recruits were given intensive four-week courses in seamanship, signaling, knot tying, life saving, and boat handling. This was the Coast Guard's first step toward integrating the races.³⁹⁹

By the end of World War II, 5,000 African Americans had served in the Coast Guard. Although most served as stewards, the Coast Guard, as Admiral Sexton had predicted, could not remain segregated; indeed, the Coast Guard chose not to do so. Before reverting to Treasury Department control in 1945, the Coast Guard had developed perhaps the most advanced racial policy in the entire American military, with African American officers and petty officers exercising authority over whites on racially integrated weather ships, escort vessels, and some smaller craft, and, African American enlisted men serving in a variety of specialties.⁴⁰⁰

Secretary Forrestal was convinced that integration was the right course of action for the postwar U.S. Navy. In two administrative orders, he attempted to achieve this objective. In

³⁹⁹ Office of War Information – Navy Department – Release N 295.

⁴⁰⁰ Bernard C. Nalty, *Long Passage to Korea: Black Sailors and the Integration of the U.S. Navy*, (Washington, D.C.: Naval Historical Center, 2003), p. 19.

December of 1945, he issued a directive, called “AInav 423-45,” to all ships and stations stating that:

In the administration of naval personnel, no differentiation shall be made because of race or color. This applies also to authorized personnel of all the Armed Forces aboard Navy ships or at Navy stations and activities.”⁴⁰¹

Finally on February 27, 1946, the U.S. Navy took the inevitable step of opening up general service assignments without any restrictions and became the first branch of the American military to be integrated. In Circular Letter 48-46, the Navy ordered that:

Effective immediately, all restrictions governing types of assignments for which Negro naval personnel are eligible are hereby lifted. Henceforth, they shall be eligible for all types of assignments in all ratings in all activities and all ships of the naval service...

In the utilization of housing, messing, and other facilities, no special or unusual provisions will be made for the accommodation of Negroes.⁴⁰²

World War II had a profound impact on many areas of American society. The conflict brought an end to the Great Depression, propelled unparalleled numbers of women into the American work force, launched an era of sustained economic growth, and marked the rise of the United States to global preeminence.

The war also changed the political and economic status of African Americans. During the war African Americans moved north to seek better jobs and living conditions. The concentration of African Americans in northern cities increased their political power, making the African American vote in certain districts the key to winning an election.

⁴⁰¹ Dennis D. Nelson, *The Integration of the Negro into the U.S. Navy*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1951), p. 20.

⁴⁰² *Ibid*, p. 21.

African Americans used this newfound power to win their full civil rights. Not content to postpone the fight against discrimination until after the war, African Americans sought a simultaneous victory over fascism abroad and racism at home. The federal government and the armed forces were the principal arenas in which the fight against discrimination occurred during World War II.

The U.S. Navy also changed radically during the Second World War. During the war, the Navy fielded the largest force of men and women in its history. On July 1, 1940, the active-duty personnel strength of the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard totaled 203,127 officers and enlisted men. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the Navy and the other services flooded the American media for calls for volunteers, which Americans answered in unprecedented numbers. Between November 30, 1941 and June 30, 1945, the Navy enlisted an average of sixty-five thousand recruits per month, a figure exceeding the total number of enlisted personnel in the Navy in 1934. The high point came during fiscal year 1944, when some twenty-five thousand men and women entered the Navy each week. Unfortunately, many of these individuals had never set foot on a boat in their lives. The Navy had to train them for service on thirty different types of combat vessels, fifty different types of auxiliaries, and thirty-five types of landing craft. The Navy needed people not only in unprecedented numbers but also with an unprecedented range of specialized skills, for ships and weapons systems were more technologically complex than ever before. By July 1, 1945, the sea services had ballooned to 4,031,097 uniformed men and women, 3,388,556 of whom served in the Navy. Despite this dizzying growth, there seldom came a time during the war that did not find the Navy wanting for

personnel.⁴⁰³

The Second World War also wrought significant changes in the U.S. Navy's racial policies. By the end of the war, African American sailors were no longer restricted to the messman's branch but found that most enlisted billets were open to them. Several factors caused the U.S. Navy to change its racial policies during World War II.

First were the demands of the civil rights movement. An obvious correlation existed between the development of the civil rights movement and the shift in the Navy's racial attitudes. Civil rights advocates, spokesmen of the growing civil rights organizations and their allies in Congress, the White House, and the American media formed a "pressure group" that enlisted political support for equal opportunity measures. Their arena: presidential politics. In several presidential elections, they successfully traded their political assistance for political reform. For example, their influence was felt in Franklin Roosevelt's decision to enlist African Americans for general service in the World War II Navy. Running through all their demands and expressed more and more clearly during World War II was the belief that segregation itself was discrimination.

There were also a number of "institutional" and "individual" factors that impacted the racial policies of the World War II U.S. Navy. The most prominent of these "institutional factors" were federal legislation and executive orders. During World War II, most Americans slowly moved toward accepting the proposition that equal treatment and opportunity for the nation's minorities were both just and prudent. A long, drawn-out process, this acceptance was

⁴⁰³ *All Hands*, October 1945, pp. 33, 47; Julius Augustus Furer, *Administration of the Navy Department in World War II* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1959), p. 34; U.S. Navy Department, "United States Naval Administration in World War II, Bureau of Naval Personnel, History of the Enlisted Personnel Activity," (Washington: Navy Department, 1946), enlisted distribution section, pp. 43-48.

in reality a grudging concession to the demands of civil rights advocates; translated into federal legislation, and it exerted constant pressure on the racial policies of the U.S. Navy. The Selective Service Act of 1940, for example, provided an important reason for integrating when, as interpreted by the executive branch, its racial provisions required the Navy to accept a quota of African Americans among its draftees. The Navy could evade the provisions of the Selective Service Act for only so long before the influx of African American draftees, in conjunction with other pressures, led to changes in the Navy's racial policies.

Questions concerning the effect of law on social custom, and particularly the issue of whether the federal government should force social change or await the popular will, are relevant here. In the case of the American military, a sector of society that often recognized the primacy of authority and law, the answer was clear. Ordered to integrate, whites and African Americans adjusted, though sometimes reluctantly, to a new social relationship. Many traditionalists in the U.S. Navy feared that racial mixing would eventually lead to racial unrest, but their fear proved unfounded. The performance of individual African Americans in integrated units showed that changed social relationships could also produce rapid improvement in individual and group achievement and thus increase military efficiency.

The quest for military efficiency was another institutional factor that affected the U.S. Navy's racial policies. Military efficiency had always been used by the Navy to rationalize racial exclusion and segregation. Later, it became a consideration in the decision of the Navy to integrate its units. Reinforcing the efficiency argument was the realization by the Navy that manpower could no longer be considered an inexhaustible resource. World War II had demonstrated that the federal government could not ignore the military and industrial potential of any segment of its population; especially African Americans. Timing was somewhat dependent

on the size and mission of the U.S. Navy. The Navy integrated when it became obvious that African American manpower could not be used efficiently in separate organizations.

The integration of the U.S. Navy was also influenced by certain individuals within the service who personified the awakening of America's social conscience. Individuals in the Bureau of Naval Personnel's Special Programs Unit such as Lieutenant Commanders Charles E. Dillon, Donald G. VanNess, and Christopher Sargent, Adlai Stevenson, and last but not least, James V. Forrestal, led the Navy in its crusade to integrate not because civil activists demanded it, nor because the law demanded it, nor even because military efficiency required it, but because they believed that it was the right thing to do.

More telling in the long run than the changes in policy in World War II were the changes in the racial attitudes of the U.S. Navy. From the beginning, there were some white naval officers who objected to the Navy's racial policy. One ensign, the son of wealthy New Yorkers, was so shocked by the attitudes he encountered in the naval service that he donated a full month's pay to the NAACP. "I always intended to contribute to your organization," he wrote, "but never felt so strongly about the matter as since I came in contact with the attitude of the officers of our Navy."⁴⁰⁴

There are also indications in the historical record that those who worked with African Americans began to see their value. Service aboard the USS *Mason* and the *PC 1264* gave its all-African American crews the opportunity to disprove the view of high-ranking naval officers, a view shared at that time by most Americans, that African Americans could not become able

⁴⁰⁴ Walter White, *A Rising Wind*, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1945), Reprinted edition, (Westport, Connecticut: Negro Universities Press, 1971), p. 128. Walter White was the executive secretary of the NAACP from 1931-1955.

seamen, that African Americans could not take orders from each other, and that whites would not take orders from African American superiors.

Although both ships experienced a few “teething troubles,” no racial friction developed between the white officers and African American sailors, and the crews of both vessels served capably on active duty. Eventually, the captains of both ships replaced their white petty officers and some of their commissioned officers with African Americans. One of these new officers, Samuel Gravely, became the first African American to achieve flag rank.⁴⁰⁵

Underscoring the changing attitudes of the white Navy were reports written by naval officers that praised their African American charges. Typical is the statement of Captain H. R. Harris, commanding officer of the African American radio school at Great Lakes: “With the training they have received here, our graduates have creditably handled the jobs assigned to them afloat and ashore. The skills they have learned have enabled them to make a valuable contribution to the winning of the war.”⁴⁰⁶ After commanding African American marines at Camp Lejeune, Colonel Samuel A. Woods, Jr. pointed out: “I have found that any soldier anywhere will respond to his duties if treated like a human being. The same is true of the Negro Marines as of all other persons in the service.”⁴⁰⁷

Not long after James V. Forrestal assumed the office of secretary of the navy, he proposed a plan to President Roosevelt for integrating African American sailors into the crews of large auxiliaries, not to exceed 10% of a ship’s complement. Forrestal’s predecessor, Frank

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁶ William R. Mueller, “The Negro in the Navy,” *Social Forces*, volume 24, issue 1, October 1945, p. 115.

⁴⁰⁷ Office of War Information – Release – Navy Department, N 418.

Knox, had strongly opposed the radical step of integrating the crews of warships. “It is simply impossible in the midst of a war to mix the races on the same ship,” he wrote in spring of 1942. “I can only fight one war at a time and the one in our hands is now big enough without introducing a race war besides.” Forrestal, on the other hand, personified the change in racial attitudes at the highest level, arguing that African American sailors resented not being assigned to general service billets at sea, while white sailors resented African Americans because they did not have to go in harm’s way. Forrestal argued that therefore integration would not only boost morale but also “[effect] economies of manpower” by breaking up large concentrations of African American sailors in shore billets and facilitate interchange of white sailors between the United States and forward combat areas.⁴⁰⁸

A 1945 Navy publication also symbolizes how much the Navy’s racial attitudes had changed since the attack on Pearl Harbor. In February 1945, nine months after James Forrestal became Secretary of the Navy, the Bureau of Naval Personnel released *Guide to Command of Negro Naval Personnel*. “Racial theories waste manpower,” declared a section of the document that renounced the doctrine of white supremacy:

The Navy accepts no theories of racial differences in inborn ability, but expects that every man wearing its uniform be trained and used in accordance with his maximum individual capacity determined on the basis of individual performance.⁴⁰⁹

⁴⁰⁸ Knox to Mowrer, May 1, 1942, file “General Correspondence 1942,” Franklin Knox papers, Library of Congress; Forrestal, Memorandum for the President, May 20, 1944, in volume 6 of Morris J. MacGregor, Jr. and Bernard C. Nalty, eds., *Blacks in the United States Armed Forces: Basic Documents*, (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, 1977), p. 245.

⁴⁰⁹ U.S. Navy Department, Bureau of Naval Personnel, *Guide to Command of Negro Naval Personnel*, February 12, 1945, pp. 275-293, reproduced in Volume 6 of Morris J. MacGregor, Jr. and Bernard C. Nalty, eds. *Blacks in the United States Armed Forces: Basic Documents*. 13 volumes, (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, 1977).

The guide also acknowledged that previous racial policies had probably deterred many capable and skilled African Americans from joining the Navy, thereby depriving the naval service of a valuable source of manpower. In an argument ironically similar to the one that would be used by the Supreme Court in the case of *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954), the *Guide to Command of Negro Navy Personnel* acknowledged that “separate but equal facilities” for African American sailors usually meant inferior facilities.⁴¹⁰

In conclusion, besides radically changing the American economy, the worldwide role of the United States, and the political and economic status of African Americans, World War II also changed the U.S. naval service. The Second World War not only forced the U.S. Navy to grow to unparalleled numbers and to change its racial policies. Because of contact with African Americans and their excellent performance during the conflict, World War II changed the racial attitudes of white U.S. naval personnel at all levels – a vitally necessary foundation for the full-scale integration of the sea services that was about to occur in the next several years. These changes clearly make the World War II era “the” critical period for the integration of the U.S. Navy.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid.

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U.S. Army Center of Military History, Washington, D.C.

Bureau of Naval Personnel Documents

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Lee Nicholls Collection

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