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Air Base's Jim Crow Club Flouts Army Regulations

Arrest and Transfer Of 100 Officers Bring Issue to Climax

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PM's Bureau



A white MP, club in hand, challenging two of the arrested Negro officers as they walked near the outer limits of their confinement area.

WASHINGTON, Apr. 21.—Whether one branch of the Army or one commanding officer of such branch has the power to issue regulations that conflict with General Army Regulations is the crux of controversy at an Indiana Army Air base over the commanding officer's refusal to permit Negro flying officers to use the same clubhouse as white officers.

The dispute reached a climax recently, when about 100 of the officers were arrested and transferred to another field for refusing to sign the alleged discriminatory regulation.

The NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), has written to Secretary of War Stimson, requesting an investigation; release of the arrested officers; and dismissal of charges against them—and disciplinary action against the commanding officer and others responsible for the action against the Negro fliers.

Veterans of Combat

The regulation under attack specified that certain buildings and recreational facilities at the post, Camp Freeman, Ind., were to be available for trainees and others for base, supervisory, and instructor personnel.

All Negro officers, including four veterans of overseas combat operation, as well as Negro medical officers and base personnel, were designated as trainees. As such, they were assigned to a clubhouse formerly used for non-commissioned officers.

All white officers were designated as base, supervisory, and instruc-

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tor personnel and assigned the use of the regular officers' club.

Col. Robert H. Selway, Jr., commanding officer, said the regulation he issued, was in accordance with Army Air Force standards governing trainees and instructor.

The NAACP agreed with the position taken by the Negro officers at Camp Freeman that the regulation was inconsistent with Army Regulation 210-10 governing officers' clubs, messes, and similar social organizations.

On Duty

That regulation reads in part as follows:

"No officers' club, mess, or similar social organization of officers will be permitted by the post commander to occupy any part of any public building, other than the private quarters of an officer, unless such club, mess, or other organization extend to all officers on duty at the post the right to full membership. . ."

The Negroes who were denied use of the regular officers' club were "officers on duty at the post," and as such, they contended, were entitled to use of the club.

The NAACP maintained that, in the dispute at issue, the trainee instructor regulation not only was in conflict with the Army regulation on officers' clubs, but that its application was "a clever ruse" to achieve the Negro-white segregation.

"We base the statement," said Walter White, NAACP Secretary, in his letter to Stimson, "not only upon the treatment accorded seasoned Air Force officers with overseas duty, but also upon the fact that whites were classed arbitrarily as command and supervisory employes whether they were performing such functions or not.

"Indeed, the entire history of the 477th Medium bombardment group (the tactical flying group involved in the controversy) supports this contention."

White recalled that while the group, which was formed in January, 1944, was still at Selfridge Field, the same question of separate officers' quarters arose. Col. Selway, then in charge of Selfridge Field, barred Negroes from using the officers' club. He was backed up by Maj. Gen. O. P. Hunter, commanding general of the 1st Air Force, who was quoted by White as saying:

"The country is not ready to accept white officers and colored officers at the same social level. I base that opinion on the history of this country for the past 125 years. I recognize no racial difficulty at Selfridge Field.

'Lop Them Off'

"This thing here is caused only by downtown (Detroit) agitators, and some from among you. I will weed out all the agitators in this command and lop them off. Although appropriations are hard to get, I am going to get \$75,000 for the erection of an officers' club and a social club."

Gen. Hunter got the money, but the 477th left Selfridge Field before its separate officers' quarters had been completed.

White said that substantially the same situation obtained at Godman Field, Ky., to which the 477th was transferred from Selfridge. Col. Selway was in charge, under Gen. Hunter.

The 477th bombardment group was stationed at Godman Field from May, 1944, to March of this year, when it was transferred to nearby Freeman Field for final

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combat training before being sent overseas. The 477th is an all-Negro outfit except for white command.

Col. Selway also is commanding officer at Freeman Field. Just before transfer of the 477th from Godman to Freeman, he ordered that two officers' clubs be set up, the regular officers' club for the white officers and the former non-commissioned officers' club for the Negro.

The officers in the 477th averaged 2½ years' training and long since had completed their primary and basic training. Yet all were classified as trainees under the trainee-instructor segregation order.

Refused Service

Soon after arriving at Camp Freeman, some of the Negro officers of the 477th entered the regular officers' club. They were refused service and threatened with arrest if they persisted in entering the clubhouse.

The Negro officers asked the commanding officer to clarify the regulation, in view of Army regulation 210 which entitles *all* officers on duty at a post to membership in any officers' club at the post. Instead, the entire command was informed that the original order would remain in force.

Early this month the 118th base unit arrived at the field. Negro officers in that unit also sought to enter the regular officers' club. Thirty-six were arrested, including four who recently had returned from combat overseas. All but three subsequently were released.

A few days later, Col. Selway issued Base Regulation 85-2, in which all Negro officers, including base personnel and the four veterans from overseas combat, were classified as trainees; and all white officers were classified as base, supervisory, and instructor personnel.

The order, according to White, reinforced previous Base Orders on the subject and contained a form for officers to sign which certified that "I have read and fully understand the above order."

"Believing that this order simply was another attempt to discriminate against Negro officer personnel" in violation of Army Regulation 210-10, White said, "many officers declined to endorse said regulation."

Thereupon, Selway created a board of six officers and the officers who had failed to sign the regulation were summoned before the board. When they—about 100 of them—still refused to sign, they were placed under arrest and transferred back to Camp Godman.

Leslie S. Perry, of the Washington office of the NAACP, who made a first-hand investigation of the case, told PM he thought the arrested officers were sent to Camp Godman to prevent the situation from spreading to other officers in the group.

"For more than a year," White told Stimson, "this Group (477th bombardment) has made diligent efforts to secure a thorough investigation of the manner in which it has been commanded. As far as I have been able to ascertain, the War Dept. has not seen fit to make the type and kind of investigation which conditions urgently require and warrant."

"We urge that a thorough-going investigation be made . . . and that particular attention be given to the attempts of Col. Selway and Gen. Hunter to segregate Negro officers in violation of War Dept. regula-

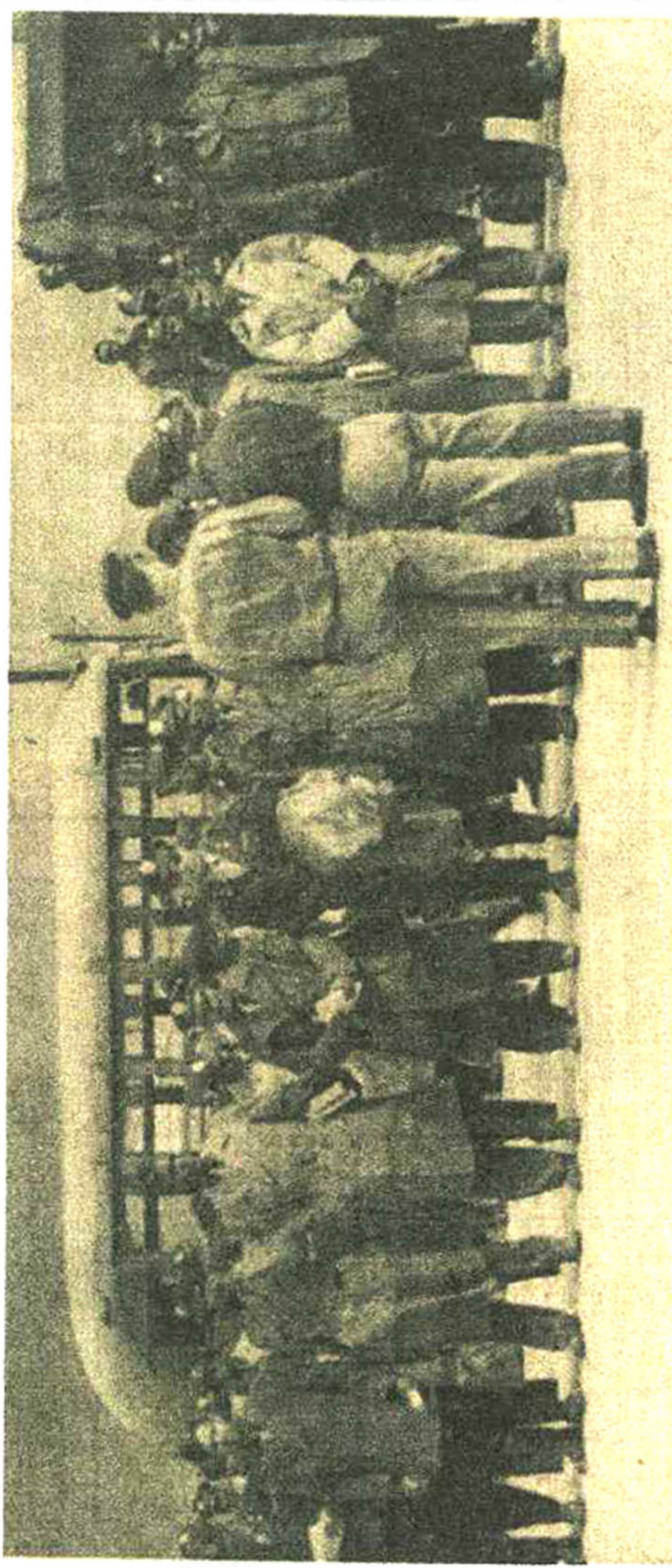
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tions and policies.

"We further urge that all officers now under arrest on charge of violating the aforesaid orders and regulations, or whose arrest is contemplated, be immediately released and such charges dismissed.

"We further urge that if such investigation discloses a willful violation of such regulations and policies, as we believe it will, that Col. Robert H. Selway, Jr., and Maj. Gen. Frank O. P. Hunter be subjected to appropriate disciplinary action."

The War Dept. announced soon after receipt of White's letter that it was investigating.



Negro flying officers of the U. S. Army, under arrest for refusing to sign a regulation which, they contended, barred them from a club improperly reserved for white officers, are lined up here for roll call and checking before being transferred from Freeman Field, Ind., to Godman Field, Ky. About 100 Negroes were arrested.

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