

June, 1960

p. 105

Racism in the U.S. Navy of W.W. II

OF ALL three services, the Navy had the poorest record in race relations, complicated by the fact that its caste system was generally the most rigid. From 1940 to 1943, Navy policy was summed up in the words of a directive that "the enlistment of Negroes (other than as mess attendants) leads to disruptive and undermining conditions . . . (not conducive to) general ship efficiency . . ."

In 1943, Negroes were finally given a few general assignments outside the Steward's Branch. There was also a segregated training school at Great Lakes for technical jobs. The first Negro officers in Navy history, 13 men, were commissioned in March 1944. Their graduation ceremony was graceless and almost furtive, as though Navy traditions were being sullied by the introduction of Negro officers.

The wartime experience was tragic. In October 1943, many Negro members of a SeaBee battalion were dishonorably discharged, mainly because they had protested that they were victims of discrimination. In Guam, Christmas Day 1944, Negro sailors were attacked by white marines. In Camp Rouseau, California, in 1945, 1,000 Negro seamen went on a hunger strike in demonstration against Jim Crow practices and lack of promotions.

After V-J Day, almost all Negro officers, convinced the Navy offered them no future, applied for demobilization. By 1948, only four Negro officers were still on active duty.

But by this time, armed forces integration had become inevitable for many reasons. Among them were concern for world opinion, the need for better use of manpower—plus the protests of Americans, Northern and Southern, who felt that such segregation was grotesquely wrong. Once Executive Order 9981 was issued, the process began quickly. By 1950, the President's Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services, headed by Judge Charles Fahy of Georgia, was able to report that most of its recommendations had been accepted by the services. Today there are no segregated units anywhere.

Only one aspect of the armed forces integration picture is still debated. Some Negro leaders deplore the fact that, to this day, more than 90 percent of the men of the Navy's Steward's Branch (food-handlers and servers) are Negroes and Filipinos. But here, too, strides have been great. Fewer than 50 percent of all Negro sailors are in the Steward's Branch today, compared to 78 percent ten years ago and 100 percent at the beginning of World War II.