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Negroes Find the British Draw Line Too, but Subtly



Negroes in Britain: Discrimination was usually subtle

Much has been written and much more whispered about the relations between American Negro soldiers and white girls in Britain and elsewhere. To get at the facts, NEWSWEEK assigned William Wilson of its London bureau to a candid review of the subject. His findings, largely from the standpoint of the Negro soldiers themselves, follow:

In Cardiff three men met to discuss a problem which had scandalized Welsh public opinion. They were the Lord Mayor of Cardiff, the Chief Constable, and a United States Army officer. The problem: What could be done about the teen-age camp followers who had come from other parts of the country in the wake of American Negro troops?

Nobody was inclined to blame the troops. The officials realized there had been camp followers in every war. Resentment centered on the girls. But the Negroes, knowing that Welsh anger was directed at the prostitutes, felt nevertheless the people's resentment was greater because the troops involved were Negro.

They pointed out, and correctly, that published stories of girls swarming railway stations and overwhelming military police in their efforts to embrace departing American Negro soldiers had turned out on investigation to be exaggerated versions of incidents in which two or three girls had come to say their farewells to their Negro friends. Moreover, since the troops in Cardiff were merely waiting there for a ship to America, any local difficulty should automatically adjust itself.

But the Cardiff incident was only one of the problems that had arisen while Negro troops were stationed in Britain. Most Negro soldiers feel that they have found less racial discrimination in Britain than in America. But others are convinced that discrimination has grown up during

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the period they have been here, and they believe it has spread to British civilians from white American troops. Too, there is fairly general agreement that discrimination in Britain on racial grounds tends to be subtle.

Relations between Negro troops and British civilians vary. Generally they are more cordial in small towns where no other American troops have been stationed. A lot of Negroes have found that the people in the small towns thawed from their initial reserve—the same process that applied to any Allied troops—and began to invite them to their homes. British girls would dance and go to movies and pubs with them. As far as the American Army authorities here know, there has only been one marriage between an English white girl and a Negro soldier. But there have been a number of illegitimate children of mixed parentage.

Red Cross and the Negro: In some areas where relations have been amicable, it has been the result of preparatory work by the Red Cross. When a rest center and leave camp were established at Barnstaple on the west coast, Red Cross officials preceded Negro troops, appealed to the local populace for cooperation, and got it. The wives and daughters of civil officials, clergy, and prominent families volunteered for hostess duty at the Red Cross clubs. Many of the townspeople regularly invited Negro soldiers to their homes. At Southampton, a Red Cross club under the directorship of James Chiles of New York has been a success with a large list of voluntary hostesses from Southampton. The club dances are open to both white and Negro soldiers, and though most of the troops using the club are Negroes, a few white soldiers attend. The only stipulation, intended to avoid one source of trouble, is that the troops can't bring their own girls.

The relations in Cambridge, where both white and Negro troops have been stationed, were less satisfactory from the Negro point of view. The Negroes complained that the white girls with them were often stopped by police on the street and urged to go home. Red Cross officials intervened with the civic authorities. The practice was discontinued, but some publicans continued to refuse service to white girls accompanied by Negro soldiers. In one case a barmaid alleged that the girls accompanying two colored troops were prostitutes. She said she wanted to avoid having her pub get a bad name. Actually the girls were respectable hostesses from a nearby Red Cross club. They had stopped in for a drink on the way home.

In Ipswich, the center of the Eighth Air Force area, it became customary for one dance hall to admit white and Negro troops on alternate nights. The Negroes complained that the practice led to an increase in discrimination. This was because

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a few white soldiers watched the Negro dances and explained to their British friends they did it to identify the girls who associated with Negroes so they could be sure of avoiding them. The whites insisted that the girls with Negroes fell mainly into two categories—bobby-soxers and “semi-professional” prostitutes.

Supremacy, London Style: According to Negroes stationed in London, there is a lot of discrimination in a subtle form. They say Negroes are charged slightly more for their drinks in some pubs to discourage them from coming, are turned away from restaurants which aren't full, and are told that public places are closed if the hour is late. They also say that once they've stayed in a hotel they are known by name as Negroes and frequently are unable ever to get a room there again when they wire or telephone in advance. But some also admit that they may suspect discrimination where it doesn't exist. For example, hotel rooms are hard for anyone to get.

Two highly educated Negroes who seemed to be typical of their class told me they felt life in Britain had been a great experience for many Negro troops because there was less discrimination than at home. One added: “Many of our people who have always been made to feel inferior now feel equal because the British have usually treated them that way. When they go home they may feel frustrated, but they won't feel inferior.”

Another equally intelligent and not apparently more sensitive Negro took the opposite line: “Discrimination here is so subtle that it makes it harder to stand. At least in the South you know where you stand and here you don't so you're always exposing yourself to discrimination that you would avoid in America.”

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