

June, 1960

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# ***What the armed forces taught us about integration***

**5,000,000 Americans -  
servicemen, civilians  
and dependents - prove  
racial harmony is work-  
able on the job, in sch-  
ools and in everyday  
living**



BY MORTON PUNER

**O**NE MORNING LAST fall, a dozen children got off a school bus and trooped into class for a new term. The teacher started the day with a classroom joke; the children got to work.

An ordinary day, an ordinary event. Except for the fact that the children were both white and Negro. And

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the place where school started without fuss or mobs: Little Rock, Arkansas. But the pupils, children of Air Force p e r s o n n e l were not in a Little Rock public school. They were attending the Little Rock Air Force Base School. All schools on Defense Department bases have been integrated since 1954. But last year, *off-base schools* were integrated in Arkansas, Florida and Tennessee, among other places—without a single newspaper headline.

This is part of the lesson of integration in the armed forces. It started in 1948 with President Truman's Executive Order 9981 which set a policy of equal treatment and opportunity for "all persons in the armed forces without regard to race, color, religion or national origin." It took seven years, under Presidents Truman and Eisenhower, to implement that order. Today, at home and throughout the free world, can be found answers to these basic questions:

How does integration of Americans—white and Negro—really work out? How does it affect our national strength and such things as a man's choice, and his children's choice, of friends? What happens when whites and Negroes live, work and play together on equal terms?

**T**O FIND the answers, I recently made two month-long tours of Army, Air Force and Navy installations and their surrounding communities in ten countries. These included France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Iceland, Italy, Morocco, Spain and Turkey as well as the U.S. Except for Iceland, where Negroes are barred from living because of an Icelandic theory of



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racial purity, I found the extent of service integration and its lessons to be about the same.

One event quickly settled all doubts about the military value of integration—the Korean War. Perhaps the feelings of many Korean veterans are summed up in the words of Staff Sgt. Edwin Palmer, a Texan: “I guess I’m alive today because of the quality of the Negroes fighting in my outfit.”

Equally meaningful were the actions of Lieut. Comdr. Thomas J. Hudner, Jr., the first Navy man to receive the Medal of Honor in Korea. Hudner, who is white, was cited for his “desperate but unavailing battle against time, cold and flames” behind enemy lines in “selfless devotion to a shipmate.” The shipmate: Ensign Jesse LeRoy Brown, the Navy’s first Negro flyer, who was shot down by Communist anti-aircraft and died in the wreckage of his plane near the Chosin Reservoir in 1950.

It took longer for integration to work out on social and educational levels. Today Negroes, who make up about ten percent of our uniformed population, eat, sleep and train with white servicemen. Throughout the world, they and their families make equal use of all Defense Department facilities, which include nurseries, schools and supermarkets as well as barracks and rocket-launching sites.

More than 5,000,000 of these Americans—servicemen, civilians and dependents—are subject to integration in their daily lives. The results, in the words of historian Richard Bardolph, professor at the Woman’s College of the University of North Carolina, add up to “one of the most profound changes in



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American racial patterns since the Emancipation.”

But it is not the kind of change that some feared. One specter raised before integration was the notion that it would lead to interracial sex and marriage. In fact, interracial marriage was more common before integration. A Pentagon official said that such marriages are rare today.

Both white and Negro servicemen gain through integration. Fears are put in their place. The Negro takes pride in himself and the white finds he can accept individual Negroes as friends. When the rhetorical, “How would you like your sister to marry a Negro?” arises, he is apt to answer, “She can say no, can’t she?”

A Negro officer at Maxwell Field, Alabama, expressed his attitude by quoting the words of Negro leader Martin Luther King: “We would rather be the white man’s brother than his brother-in-law.”

At a battalion dance in Germany recently, Negro officers were uncertain whether to dance with the commanding officer’s wife—an old Army custom. The C.O., Col. William A. Quirey, let it be known that he had no objections and the Negro officers had their cue. To the few white officers who felt this obliged them to follow the colonel’s example, Quirey explained that each man and his wife were free to do as they pleased, without compulsion.

In 1960, the sight of Negroes in officers’ uniforms is commonplace. They do not have the problems faced by Charles Young, the third Negro graduate of West Point in 1889. When white troops refused to salute him, he had to strip off his coat and command them to salute its buttons.

In 1958, a white officer refused to shake the hand of a Negro during a



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military ceremony. He was given an official reprimand and fined \$200. The case was so rare that it gained national newspaper attention. Today, the idea is accepted that when a Negro has reached a position of command, he has earned it and is entitled to all its authority and privileges.

There are now eight Negroes at West Point, three at the Air Force Academy and seven at Annapolis. The highest ranking Negro officer in the three services is Maj. Gen. Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., deputy chief of staff for operations at USAFE headquarters in Germany. (Davis, the first Negro Air Force general, is the son of Brig. Gen. Benjamin O. Davis, Sr., who became the Army's first Negro general in 1940.)

The Army and Air Force have more than 100 Negro colonels and lieutenant colonels. There are about 200 Negro officers on active duty in the regular Navy and among the reserves. Lieut. Comdr. Dennis D. Nelson, one of the first group of 13 given wartime commissions, has seniority and highest rank among Negro Navy regulars. There are several full commanders—doctors and dentists—on extended active duty. Lieut. Comdr. Wesley A. Brown, in 1949, became the first Negro to graduate from Annapolis. Lieut. Comdr. Samuel Gravely, Jr., in February 1960, be-



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came executive officer of a destroyer—a tough, demanding job for which the Navy chooses its best men.

Of course, prejudiced attitudes, if not behavior, still exist. Many Negroes, with a lifetime of experience on the subject, can sense when a white disapproves of their color.

Capt. Simon H. Scott is Protestant chaplain at the Air Force base at Evreux, northwest of Paris. Most of his congregation is white. “I know that some of the people I lead in prayer have prejudice against me,” he said. “But I speak with them as though I were unaware of their prejudice, hoping that they will get to know me and see beyond the color of my skin.”

Integration off-duty is directly related to the cultural and social level of a serviceman and his family, and what they’re looking for in the way of after-hours fun. The greatest amount comes on higher social and cultural levels. Together, white and Negro servicemen go to the theater in New York or the opera in Milan. But they rarely integrate when they go to the honky-tonks of Montmartre or the *Gasthäuser* of Germany.

Integration doesn’t mean forced and indiscriminate mixing, the wife of the only Negro officer at Southern European Task Force headquarters in Verona, Italy, pointed out. Mrs. Louise Outlaw said she finds no barriers in her social contacts, though she makes sure her children’s friends meet certain standards of honesty and goodness—without regard for color or religion. As an example of how integration has changed social attitudes, Verona’s American parent-teachers association—predominantly white—elected Louise Outlaw their president last spring.

This happened in Europe where



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### *Unit cohesion in Vietnam (1968)*

Americans are freer to act as conscience, not just custom, dictates. Of all countries, it is in the U.S. that the success of armed forces integration is most striking and offers the greatest contrast. Here, for the Negro serviceman, the short bus ride from base to town—any town—often represents a trip to the past. Uniformed or not, he may again be forced to conform to patterns of segregation—to go to back doors, to look for facilities marked “Colored.”

The differences show in many ways. Recently, the commander of the air base outside Grand Forks, North Dakota, met with the local Chamber of Commerce. Some of the town’s restaurants had refused to serve Negro airmen. The commander made clear that all airmen are entitled to equal treatment, that places that discriminated against any would be declared off-limits. Chamber members carried his words back to the community; complaints of discrimination stopped.

In fact, the situation today is a dramatic reversal of the way things were before integration became policy. During much of World War II, Negroes were allowed to serve only in the Steward’s Branch in the Navy, and as truck drivers or heavy



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manual laborers in the Army. Sometimes they were pitched into battle ill-prepared, with disastrous results. Such incidents nourished the myth: "Negroes can't fight."

This was simply not true. At the height of the war in Europe, 50 Army researchers interviewed thousands of soldiers about their attitudes toward Negro platoons fighting experimentally within their white divisions. The findings: Negroes, fighting within an integrated framework, could do just as well as whites. These findings were never made public during the war; Washington officials feared that disclosure would force the Army into hasty, ill-timed reorganization on an integrated basis. Segregation generally remained the rule.

**O**F 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 Ne-



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gro 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



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at the beginning of World War II.

Admiral H. P. Smith, chief of naval personnel until February 1960, explains the situation this way: so long as Negroes are limited in their employment and educational opportunities in civilian life, they are bound to be assigned Navy jobs requiring lesser degrees of skill.

For Negroes themselves, life in the integrated services is filled with challenges and opportunity denied them as civilians. The record shows they are making the most of it. The percentage of Negroes taking courses with the United States Armed Forces Institute is 14 percent; for the rest of men in uniform, the figure is nine percent of all non-commissioned officers.

James C. Evans, who is civilian assistant, Office of the Secretary of Defense, is the man most responsible for carrying out integration in the armed forces. Evans, a Negro, is a graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and an electronics as well as manpower specialist. He makes the point: "If there is a lag in a magnetic circuit, we change it, improve it and it never snaps back. We've done the same thing for a cultural lag in our society; through integration, we have changed it, improved it. It can never snap back."

Through integration, our mighty defense machinery, with all its potential for destruction, is sowing seeds of brotherly love and understanding among Americans. Some of the yield is already in.

According to Maj. Gen. Harvey Fischer, a West Pointer and Korean veteran: "Heart is heart, blood is blood, muscle is muscle . . . what difference does color make?"



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And according to Negro Navy Lieut. (j.g.) L.E. Jenkins: "After awhile you start thinking of whites as people."

