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The Fight for Equality: African American Seabees During World War II

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
of Master of Arts in War, Diplomacy, and Society

January 2023

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January 2023

The Fight for Equality: African American Seabees During World War II

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ABSTRACT

The Fight for Equality: African American Seabees During World War II

by Victoria Castillo

This thesis outlines the Navy's movement towards black inclusion from the beginning of World War I to the end of World War II through the lens of African American Seabees as well as the two integrated Seabee Battalions, 34th and 80th. While examining African American Seabees during World War II, one can see the injustices they were facing in the Navy. Seabees are one of the forgotten branches during World War II, but while examining the history of African Americans serving in the U.S. Navy and the Seabees, we start to understand how they were able to integrate blacks and how blacks were able to fight for their equality in the Seabees. This thesis argues that African American Seabees, frustrated with their treatment in the Navy, were the driving force behind the Navy changing its policies on the treatment of black seamen. Through the examination of materials including newspaper articles, military documents, cruise logs, letters, speeches from President Roosevelt and Secretary of the Navy Knox, dissertations, and books about the Navy's integration policies and their overall operation during World War I and World War II this thesis pieced together African American Seabees' fight for equal opportunity.

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Introduction

“I want to call you attention to some of the discrimination that we colored boys have to undergo while serving under the same flag for the same purposes... Only a few hours ago we was fighting the enemy together now we are fighting among ourselves. The simple reason that we are black and they are white.”¹

Throughout the Second World War, African Americans fought for equality at home and in the Armed Forces. Letters, like the one from Mr. Searles above, flooded the offices of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) during the Second World War and, describe the constant inequalities blacks faced in the Navy, the promises that were broken, and the failure of different policies that were supposed to protect African Americans within the Navy from discrimination. Racial discrimination during World War II was constant, and for many African Americans who, like Searles, believed that by serving in the war, they would be treated the same as their white counterparts, the reality proved otherwise and was disappointing. These men joined the Navy in hopes of becoming and being seen as equal American citizens, but that was not the reality these men faced, and many were disappointed to find out that nothing changed for them.

Well before World War II, however, racial discrimination against African Americans was mandated in both law and custom in the United States. In 1896, the Supreme Court decided in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, that racial segregation was constitutional. This led to the passage of a series of laws that designated public facilities for white and African Americans, otherwise known as

¹ Sylvester Searles to Walter White, March 8, 1944, Paper of the NAACP: Part 9. Discrimination in the U.S. Armed Forces, Series B 1940-1950.

Jim Crow laws. These ordinances also supported cultural assumptions that African Americans were the inferior race. As a result, the Ku Klux Klan and other racist individuals and groups terrorized and killed many blacks with little fear of being arrested. Jim Crow laws not only supported individuals and groups that terrorized and killed blacks, but also effected the black community, by shaping every aspect of the way that African Americans lived their daily lives. Supporters of Jim Crow pointed to the constitutionality of these “separate but equal” laws by arguing that blacks still had equal access to places, institutions, and accommodations (housing).² This was done to justify segregation that existed in the United States. Government officials throughout the nation went to great lengths to ensure whites and blacks remained separate in the country.³ Thus, allowing blacks to serve alongside whites in the Armed Forces was unacceptable to many and any suggestions or support to integrate the military would cause public conflict, so the military thought.⁴ This belief continued through World War I and years before and following the outbreak of World War II.

While much has been written about the African American experience with the Armed Forces, particularly, the U.S. Army, less is known, however, about the black experience in the U.S. Navy and one small branch within it: the Naval Construction Battalion (Seabees). Although black acceptance rates in the U.S. Navy were much smaller than the U.S. Army, their story, and its relationship to understanding how the military and civilians felt about segregation and how black Seabees helped pave the way for equality in the Navy is important. This thesis examines the history of African Americans serving in the U.S. Navy and the Naval Construction Battalion

² David Taft Terry, “Dismantling Jim Crow: Challenges to Racial Segregation, 1935 – 1955.” *Black History Bulletin* 67, no. 1/4 (2004): 14. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44214652>.

³ David Taft Terry, “Dismantling Jim Crow: Challenges to Racial Segregation, 1935 – 1955.”

⁴ David Taft Terry, “Dismantling Jim Crow: Challenges to Racial Segregation, 1935 – 1955.”

(Seabees) and the Navy's push to allow African Americans to serve in branches, other than the messmen. The thesis argues that African American Seabees, frustrated with their treatment in the Navy were the driving forces behind the Navy changing its policies with regards to the treatment of black seamen, which resulted in the U.S. Navy taking the necessary steps for black opportunity and equality towards the end of World War II.

Historians have extensively researched racial discrimination in the military during World War II. Their conversation on whether racial segregation and discriminatory policies, based on promotion, assignments, and serving in the armed forces had a significant effect on the military has been critical to the narrative of African Americans serving in the military. Some of the questions scholars have raised include, why were racial segregation and discriminatory policies put into place, did the policies work, how were African Americans affected by these policies, and what were the outcomes of racial inequalities. The overwhelming conclusion to these questions is that racial discriminatory policies in the Armed Forces were not as successful at maintaining the racial status quo as the military hoped. These conclusions are important because they show the shift in ideology in the armed forces and the United States, but it also showed how the need for manpower and the pressure from organizations, such as the NAACP, who supported integration and wanted to end discrimination. Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Navy fleet in the Pacific was limited and they needed to rebuild their fleet. The Navy allowed African Americans into the Navy not because they wanted to, but rather, the Navy needed them to replenish their lost fleet. Allowing African Americans into the Navy in positions beyond messman, provided African Americans a chance to show the Navy what they were capable of. This move by the Navy, of allowing African Americans to be more than messmen, highlighted the importance of African Americans efforts during the war, as well as their unwillingness to

give up on becoming equal to their white counterpart in the Armed Forces and stand up for themselves, despite the punishments they could have received. It also showed that the public and many organizations supported this effort of allowing African Americans to have more opportunities from the Navy. African Americans spoke-out about the injustices they faced in the hopes of ending discriminatory policies towards people of color. African Americans servicemembers and civilians protested through organized and spontaneous campaigns, letters, and speeches. To keep the Armed Forces accountable to their policies, African Americans and other civilians made sure their voices were being heard and the discrimination they faced made it to the public.

Scholarly work on discrimination in the military during World War II has primarily focused on the Army as the lens by which to understand racism in the Armed Forces. This is because the Army kept better records and because the Army acceptance rate for black men was higher than the Navy. African Americans made up less than 10% of the Navy and they only worked in the messman branch at the start of the war.⁵ Scholarship that has focused on the Navy's discrimination of black men, such as Dennis Nelson, Richard Dalfiume, Lee Finkle, and Chris Dixon, have overlooked the Seabees or have not done extensive research into the Seabees, because most black seamen served outside the ranks of the Seabees. Furthermore, the Seabees were established shortly after the U.S. entered World War II, and therefore documentation on the units and the experiences of blacks serving with them is sparse. However, this lack of documentation is a part of their story. To understand African American Seabees story, one needs to examine magazine or newspapers accounts of black Seamen and Seabees, rely on oral stories

⁵ Lee Finkle, *Forum For Protest: Black Press During World War II* (Rutherford, N.J.: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1975), 94.

and written personal histories of the men who were there, and this thesis does both to detail the African American Seabee experience. It uses these sources to reveal how African American Seabees helped change racial discrimination in the Navy and illuminate how the Navy's experiment of integrating Seabee battalions had such great success in showcasing how well black and whites could work together. Which led the Navy taking necessary steps forward to the long journey of integration and desegregation for African Americans in terms of opportunity, better leadership, and equality by the end of World War II.

The Integration of the Negro in the U.S. Navy (1951) by, Golden Thirteen member, Dennis Nelson was first submitted as a report on April 26, 1948, to the National Defense Conference on Negro Affairs and later became a published book. In his book, Nelson analyzed the constant struggles blacks had in the Navy, despite policies, that in theory were anti-discriminatory, being passed. The Golden Thirteen were the thirteen African American enlisted men who became the first African American commissioned and warrant officers in the U.S. Navy in 1944. Although Nelson's experience gives us a firsthand account on blacks struggles for equality, his work is used to piece together how the Navy integrated blacks into roles beyond messmen. Nelson argues that racial stereotypes are fictional and that with equal treatment and good leadership anyone, regardless of race, is capable of being a part of an integrated Navy. Instead of challenging societal beliefs such as blacks being the inferior race and constantly facing inequality, that were unsuitable for the ideals of democracy, that of inequality, Nelson believes that the focus on the inferiority of the black race not only hurt the Navy but hindered blacks from achieving their full potentials. Nelson's research led him to believe that the Navy's discriminatory policies during World War II did not work because the Navy did not regulate them properly; the Navy put these policies into place, but they never checked to see if the

officers were implementing them, they simply assumed they were being followed. These policies would go on to reflect the national social patterns, rather than the Navy doing what was best for themselves during wartime. The Navy's policies regarding race during the Second World War were put in place to support beliefs in the separation of the races among a large population of American society but would end up being detrimental to the Navy's efficacy in fighting.

Though Nelson's research showed how African American Navy personnel were poorly treated, he also used a variety of examples to show the lack of enforcement of the anti-discriminatory policies, to show that these policies were not being followed. One of his examples was the 34th Seabee battalion's hunger strike for equality. Nelson used this example to show that African American men belonging to the 34th Seabee battalion were promised fair treatment, in regard to promotions, but because the officers assigned to this battalion never enforced these policies, the men staged a hunger strike demanding these policies to be enforced. This thesis agrees and uses his examination of the 34th Seabee battalion's hunger strike for equality to show that the African Americans attached to this battalion faced inequality that was influenced by the Navy's decision to assigned white-southern officers to the battalion. The focus of this strike offers important background on the everyday experience of black Seabees which supports the argument about black Seabees fighting for their equality and it also informs the readers about the inequalities within the Seabees.

Historian Richard Dalfume's *Desegregation of the U.S. Armed Forces* (1975) examines the interplay between national identity, the racially segregated United States military culture, and the possibilities of transnational racial advancement. He shows that African Americans contemplated not just their own personal oppression, but also that of colonized people

throughout the Pacific region. Dalfiume's book covers the years between 1939-1953 and shows that during this time the U.S. Armed Forces moved from a policy of restricting and segregating the black soldier, based largely on racial stereotypes that emerged during the First World War, to a policy of equal opportunity and integration. Dalfiume highlights the role President Roosevelt played in supporting black advancement in the Armed Forces. Although this thesis does take a glance into President Roosevelt contribution to black advancement in the Navy, it does only touch on the role President Roosevelt had on influencing the Secretary of the Navy to make policy changes that support equality. This book is not a dialogue about how African Americans in the Armed Forces felt, but rather how the individual branches felt about the integration of blacks and the policies surrounding them. This thesis uses this work to understand President Roosevelt's thoughts and opinions on allowing African Americans into the Navy and the Navy's constant push back on allowing blacks into positions other than messmen. Further, this thesis analyzes the African American Seabees story of how discrimination affected them. It argues that the Armed Forces created better policies of inclusion for African Americans because African Americans who were serving in the Armed Forces constantly challenged the Armed Forces to do so.

In *Forum for Protest* (1975) Lee Finkle examines the wartime role of the black press on the home front and in the Armed Forces during the Second World War. The press played a huge role of informing citizens of the constant injustices African Americans faced and it also put pressure on the Navy to make changes so they could be called out for their racist antics, and not for their success during the war. Finkle argues that the Navy had not formulated a plan on how they would either enlist or use African Americans in the war and they were not prepared to use African Americans compared to how the Army already had a plan in motion for using African

Americans. The Navy did not formulate a plan because they did not want to accept any blacks into the branch, they were trying to keep blacks out for as long as they could.⁶ The Navy Department “refused to adopt a policy of accepting blacks on a proportional basis until almost a year and a half after the war began.”⁷ According to Finkle, it took the Navy a long time to make changes because they were too stubborn to or simply did not know how to. Finkle’s analysis on the Navy’s policies on blacks joining the Navy, was “if it isn’t broken why fix it”. In other words, according to the Navy, their system was not broken and until it was, they are not going to do anything about it. Finkle’s work focused more on the discrimination of blacks in the Navy from 1940-1943. This work helps to contextualize what the Navy thought about race, and it drives the point that the Navy did not want to do anything regarding blacks. This thesis builds on this work by highlighting the importance of the press in publicizing the story of African American Seabees story in larger conversations about discrimination and civil rights. The thesis also uses this work to showcase how the Navy did not want blacks to be able to enlist in anything other than a messman. However, the example of African American Seabees mistreatment showed that by speaking out about their mistreatment and discriminatory policies, the Navy shifted their mind to become more inclusive towards African Americans.

Historian Russell Buchanan’s book *Black Americans in World War II* (1977) focuses on black migration and employment, blacks in the military, race riots, and the Double V campaign. Buchanan argues that civil rights were won in the court room during World War II. The thesis agrees with Buchanan’s finding that civil rights were fought and won in the court room. However, it also reveals that the court room was not the only place where civil rights were

⁶ Finkle, *Forum For Protest: Black Press During World War II* 157.

⁷ Finkle, *Forum For Protest: Black Press During World War II* 157.

fought and won; indeed, as this thesis shows, civil rights and discrimination had to be fought in multiple arenas. The 80th Seabee Battalion, reveal both were true. The public was just one example of the multiple arenas that allowed the 80th Seabee battalion to fight for their civil rights in the court room. This thesis also engages with Buchanan's work through an analysis of how Jim Crow effected the Navy and Naval treatment of African Americans.

Historian Chris Dixon's book *African Americans and the Pacific War 1941-1945 Race, Nationality, and the Fight for Freedom* (2018) argues that blacks' wartime service, such as, the experience of combat and political implications of African Americans service on the frontlines, was of immense significance during the war, and the fight for their civil rights. Dixon's work raises questions relating to Black service in the Pacific War. The questions he puts forth include how African Americans overcame the contradiction between America's self-declared mission as the agent of international liberty and freedom, and the ongoing realities of American racism and inequality. His finding was that African Americans understood that America was fighting for international liberty and freedom, but African Americans were not gaining the same equality they were fighting for others to have. African Americans knew of this imbalanced, but they continued to fight for international equality, in hopes of one day gaining their own. Dixon's work deepens one's understanding of the connection between the United States' role as an international power and the racial ideologies and practices that characterized American life during the mid-twentieth century. This thesis uses Dixon's work to support the premise that African Americans were of immense significance during the war and how the inclusion of African Americans caused concerns when serving on the frontlines, specifically with white men. The thesis also makes a connection to the character of American racism and its persistence; meaning it examines how the Armed Forces followed U.S. custom and legal policies regarding

racial segregation. Through manuscripts, newspapers, magazines, and interviews, Dixon's work as well as this thesis adds to the complex narrative of American racism during the Second World War.

This thesis considers the importance of African American Seabee's wartime service in the fight for civil rights during World War II. It argues that African American Seabees fight for equality, demonstrated, through a peaceful hunger strike, letter writing to the NAACP, and having a healthy dose of legal knowhow, led to the removal of racist white-southern officers that would help pave the way for equality in the Seabees as well as in the Navy. Researching the story of World War II African American Seabees raises wider questions relating to the Navy's policies, as well as African American Seabee's service in the war. African American Seabees sought to overcome the Navy and majority of the United States beliefs about them, that they were lazy, only good for menial jobs, and not capable of fighting in the war. Through the Navy's experiment of the two integrated battalions, African Americans Seabees successfully contributed to the war and fought for the rights promised to them at the time of enlistment. The African American Seabee's experience and fight for equality during World War II is significant because it helps scholars understand the ways that a group of African Americans pushed the Navy to understand the importance of allowing African Americans to work in branches other than that of messmen and that white and blacks could work together successfully if guided by someone who did the best possible job regardless of the color of their personnel. By examining and analyzing the African American Seabees in the integrated 34th and 80th battalion, scholars can see how the Navy began taking the necessary steps to make progress, regarding pay, opportunity, better leadership, and assignments, for black equality after World War II. Through integration these

units revealed how successful white and black Seabees could work together if racial considerations were set aside and focused on winning the war.

Chapter 1 examines World War I and the experiences of African Americans in the interwar period. It highlights military policies regarding enlistment, black roles in Armed Forces, and their struggle for equality. Chapter 2 focuses on the experience of African Americans during World War II. It focuses on the Navy's policies regarding black seamen and the fight to keep African Americans serving only in the messmen branch. Chapter 3 examines the creation and history of the Seabees and how African Americans became part of the Naval Construction Battalion. It also focuses on the general black Seabee experience outside of the integrated battalions. Chapter 4 examines the movement, history, and fight for equality in the two integrated battalions, 34th and 80th. It will examine both battalions separately and briefly compare how these two were facing the same problems in their units.

Chapter 1: Equality in 1913-1940

“It’s hard to be a patriot when you don’t even feel like a citizen.”⁸

African Americans have contributed to every war the United States has engaged in during its history, but they have rarely been considered a full patriot or an equal citizen. Many African Americans felt the sentiments of Seaman Second Class Joseph LaNier II that opened this chapter. They have expressed these same thoughts and feelings through letters, during speeches, or in casual conversations during various U.S. wars. In the years before the outbreak of World War II, black men were not given many opportunities in the United States military, regardless of their previous service. African Americans have long served in the military during the nation’s history, but have often been restricted to menial jobs, as support labor, yet these roles were necessary in successful mobilization and deployment of the U.S. Armed Forces.

Blacks suffered oppression in the United States under first the American institution of slavery and then under the practices of segregation and discrimination that were codified under Jim Crow laws. When the U.S. entered the Great War in 1917, African Americans were eager to serve and show their patriotism in hopes of becoming recognized as full U.S. citizens. Nevertheless, they were barred from the Marines, served in only menial roles in the Navy, and were regulated to mainly noncombat support units in the Army.⁹ The reasons for this was that many of the Jim Crow racial practices and policies addressed white southerners’ demands “that

⁸ Seaman Second Class Joseph LaNier II was a part of an oral history collection on his experience before and during World War II as an African American. Joshua Schick, "Joseph Lanier II | The National WWII Museum | New Orleans", The National WWII Museum | New Orleans, 2022, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/joseph-conklin-lanier-us-navy-seabee>.

⁹ “African-American Participation during World War I.” n.d. Division of Historical and Cultural Affairs- State of Delaware. <https://history.delaware.gov/world-war-i/african-americans-ww1/#:~:text=It%20was%20documented%20on%20July,except%20for%20the%20aviation%20units>.

black men receive minimal training in firearms yet serve in the military,” and the U.S. military’s acceptance of the demand that African Americans have limited combat training.¹⁰ Southerner’s, among others, feared that blacks would use the knowledge of firearms to initiate a racial war after they returned home to the United States. It created an easy argument for Southerners to use to convince the War Department to keep African Americans away from combat. This angered many blacks because they wanted to contribute to the war efforts but were constantly sidelined by whites.¹¹ White fears of armed black men was reenforced in 1917 in Houston, Texas. After World War I, the riot in Houston, Texas caused fear for the Army as well as for the Navy by making them feel like they could not trust African Americans with weapons. The *New Journal and Guide* stated that the riots were caused by race prejudice in the Army, the discrimination they were constantly facing caused black troops to seize arms and ammunition and invaded the city. The problem for colored troops in the army that participated in this riot was that “the War Department is said to have eliminated segregation completely and rigorously from its own office personnel in Washington.¹² In reality, the War Department did not eliminate segregation in the Army, nor the Navy and it did not “completely and rigorously” eliminate segregation. Segregation was very much still in place. Since there was nothing, blacks could do about the segregated camps, they accepted them because it was the only way to ensure blacks entering the Navy had a chance to become an officer.¹³ By the end of the war there were no African American officers in the Navy. African Americans in the Navy were limited to menial jobs, labor jobs, coal heavers, stewards, cooks, or working in the messman branch. Six thousand seven

¹⁰ Jennifer D. Keene, *World War I: American Soldiers’ Lives*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006), 95.

¹¹ Wilson, *Jim Crow Joins Up: A Story of Negroes In The Armed Forces of the United*, 46.

¹² "Army Segregation Scored by Weekly Magazine: Host of Evils Produced, Editorial Says Houston Riot After World War is Recalled." *New Journal and Guide* (1916-), Sep 27, 1941.

<https://login.libproxy.chapman.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/army-segregation-scored-weekly-magazine/docview/567416864/se-2>.

¹³ Keene, *World War I (American Soldiers’ Lives)*, 97.

hundred and fifty African American sailors served in the U.S. Navy during World War I, 1.2% of the Navy's total enlistment.¹⁴ African Americans main purpose in the Navy was to provide support and materials to other companies along the front lines.¹⁵ This, amongst other examples, was a way in which Jim Crow played into the discrimination going on during World War I.

Between 1913-1917 segregation increased in the Navy, the military, and in all places across the nation. This is highlighted by the fact that the Wilson Administration resegregated the Federal Government in 1913 and by 1917, only 3 percent of the service was Black. Wilson's administration was not known for improving segregation, in fact, his administration was known for the opposite and is important because it shows the worsen conditions of racial politics and foreshadows the struggles blacks faced in the upcoming years. The worsen conditions of racial politics started to receive national coverage with newspaper editor and national civil-rights leader William Monroe Trotter, meeting, along with other prominent black leaders, President Wilson in 1913 to express their disappointment over the Jim Crow treatment of African Americans in the nation. Wilson left them with only vague assurances of making things better for African Americans under Jim Crow and by 1914, segregation in the nation's capital worsened. Workplace separation became well publicized, one instance was separate toilets in the U.S. Treasury and the Interior Department.¹⁶ African Americans were left with no change in segregation. This led Trotter to feel a sense of betrayal, he wrote, "last year he told the delegation he would seek a solution, having waited 11 months, we are entitled to an audience to learn what

¹⁴ "African American Sailors in the U.S. Navy Chronology."

¹⁵ "African Americans in the Military during World War I," The U.S. National Archives and Records, <https://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/wwi/war#warres>.

¹⁶ Dick Lehr, "The Racist Legacy of Woodrow Wilson," The Atlantic, November 27, 2015. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/11/wilson-legacy-racism/417549/>.

it is. Not only for the sake of his administration but as a matter of common justice.”¹⁷ Trotter soon got a second meeting with Wilson, and his first statement during the meeting was “we are sorely disappointed that you take the position that separation itself is not wrong, is not injurious, is not rightly offensive to you.”¹⁸ As the meeting continued, Trotter argued that the color line was established and drawn in the Treasury Department, the Navy Department, the Marine Hospital, the War Department, and other places.¹⁹ He made this point to show that the government and the military were establishing themselves as a place that Jim Crow could thrive. Wilson’s administration tried to keep blacks away from whites as much as possible and keep them from opportunities that could help advance them in society.

Wilson’s support of racial segregation policies in his administration and the federal government suggests his interest in solidifying a Jim Crow America. He began solidifying a Jim Crow America by replacing blacks with white appointees, then he pushed to institutionalize segregation within the federal civil service. Institutionalizing segregation caused an uproar from disappointed civilians. James Weldon Johnson, of the NAACP, wrote, “my distrust and dislike of the attitude of the Administration centered upon Woodrow Wilson and came nearer to constituting keen hatred for an individual than anything I have ever felt.”²⁰ Jim Crow as U.S. government policy, argued many African Americans, became destructive in the world where the U.S. was supposed to allow their citizens an opportunity for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and where democracy made up the foundations of the United States. Woodrow

¹⁷ Lehr, “The Racist Legacy of Woodrow Wilson.”

¹⁸ Lehr, “The Racist Legacy of Woodrow Wilson.”

¹⁹ Lehr, “The Racist Legacy of Woodrow Wilson.”

²⁰ Kenneth O’Reilly, “The Jim Crow Policies of Woodrow Wilson.” *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 17 (1997): 117–21. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2963252>.

Wilson's administration was doing the opposite, it was an administration that supported segregation of blacks and whites and created further imbalance in civil rights.

Wilson's administration shifted federal policy on race relations and African Americans once the U.S. declared war against Germany in April 1917. African Americans support and labor were crucial to both civilian and the military war efforts and Wilson and his Cabinet began to work to restore the bond with African American communities that were damaged by his Jim Crow government.²¹ With the war knocking on the front door, African American leaders pushed aside their differences and quickly rallied in support for the war. In July 1918, W.E.B DuBois, editor of *The Crisis*, the official publications of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, wrote the editorial titled "Close Ranks". In it, he urged African Americans to forget about the differences they have with white people and support the war efforts during World War I.²² He states, "We of the colored race have no ordinary interest in the outcome. That which the German power represents today spells death to the aspirations of Negroes and all darker races for equality, freedom and democracy."²³ African Americans knew that they were not being treated equal in the United States, but they at least believed that one day they could reach equality, whereas, if the Germans were to win, they knew they would not stand a chance in ever becoming equal or have any freedom in a world where the Germans are in charge. Because of the U.S. entrance in the Great War, African Americans became essential to the success of the U.S. in the war, and this required confronting African American military service. The Selective Service Act of 1917 allowed, but did not guarantee, the induction of African American

²¹ Judson MacLaury, "The Federal Government and Negro Workers Under President Woodrow Wilson," March 16, 2000, <https://www.dol.gov/general/aboutdol/history/shfgpr00#>.

²² "Close Ranks," *The Crisis*, Vol. 16 - No.3, July 1918, 7. https://transcription.si.edu/view/22606/NMAAHC-F28402A9865F2_3007.

²³ "Close Ranks," 7.

conscripts by local draft boards. During World War I, the Navy reached a total of Six thousand seven hundred and fifty black enlistees.²⁴ Until the 1920s, the Navy policy regarding black personal was to assign mixed crews aboard its ships with colored men eligible for all ratings and with the ability to attain the rank of petty officers.²⁵ During World War I, segregation continued in job assignments but blacks coexisted with whites on the ships, meaning, ate together and slept in the same corridors.²⁶ While the Navy continued to use African Americans in labor/menial roles, the U.S. Army was permitted to continue its tradition of segregated units.²⁷

In April 1917, Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels, a strong proponent of segregation, justified a policy of segregation in a letter to New Jersey Senator Joseph S. Frelinghuysen. He wrote, “As a matter of policy it has been customary to enlist colored men in the various ratings of the messman branch... and in the lower ratings of the fireroom, permitting colored men to sleep and eat by themselves.”²⁸ Throughout World War I, there was a strong push to keep blacks out of the Navy or at least have them work in menial jobs. The General Staff had no interest in using the war to advance the civil rights.²⁹ African Americans were living in Wilson’s Jim Crow America, and they wanted to be treated fairly and given opportunities, but that is not what the General Staff was going to do for them, they were there to win a war, not contribute to the advancement of civil rights. The government made no provision for military training of black officers and soon created segregated training camps. The Navy Department made “plans and the commanding officers tentatively chosen for two stations to train Negro

²⁴ Ruth D. Wilson, *Jim Crow Joins Up: A Story of Negroes In The Armed Forces of the United*, (States. N.Y.: William J. Clark, 1944), 46.

²⁵ Jean Byers, *A Study of the Negro in Military Service*, Washington: Dept. of Defense, 1950, 29.

²⁶ Byers, *A Study of the Negro in Military Service*, 29.

²⁷ MacLaury, “The Federal Government and Negro Workers Under President Woodrow Wilson.”

²⁸ “African American Sailors in the U.S. Navy Chronology,” January 14, 2022, <https://www.history.navy.mil/browse-by-topic/diversity/african-americans/chronology.html>.

²⁹ Keene, *World War I (American Soldiers’ Lives)*, 99.

seamen.”³⁰ They did not want black officers because they believed they could not lead troops as well as whites could, it is also because blacks were not viewed as a full citizen in the eyes of many government and military officials’. African American men disapproved of this decision and protested over the discriminatory practice of not letting them lead troops, but despite the outcry for equality, the military and the U.S. government did nothing to reverse the discriminatory practices of the Navy.

Outside of the Naval bases, there was also unrest for African Americans living throughout the United States and during and after World War I. After the Great War, African Americans were encouraged by the NAACP to show the spirit of Americanism, patriotism, and the proof that African Americans could and did contribute to the protection and advancement of the country, to counteract racial tensions and stereotypes. As a result, African American service men began to expect more equality in wages and job opportunities when they returned home because they believed they reached Americanism, allegiance to the traditions, institutions, and ideals of the United States.³¹ After the war, African Americans felt like they earned equality, equal to their white counterparts, through their defense of the U.S. and U.S. democracy.³² They put their live on the line just like the white soldiers, so they deserve to be treated as full American citizens.

African Americans returning home from the war, came home to a rise of racial violence. They came home believing they were returning as heroes, but soon faced many battles over equality in American society. On the one hand, black soldiers symbolized the hopes and

³⁰ Wilson, *Jim Crow Joins Up: A Story of Negroes In The Armed Forces of the United*, 46.

³¹ “African-American Participation during World War I.”

³² “African-American Participation during World War I.”

aspiration for African Americans to live in a true democracy in the United States. On the other hand, many white Americans viewed returning African American soldiers as a threat “because of their military service and exposure to new ideas about race and equality, especially in France.”³³ In France, black soldiers were not seen as any different to white soldiers, they were there to fight and help win the war, they were not treated as second class citizens, they were treated as soldiers. However, back in the United States, blacks were not viewed as heroes for many.

This experience resulted in the emergence of a new movement among African Americans, the New Negro Movement. Supported by the NAACP, race leaders such as W.E.B. Dubois, black newspapers, and veterans, the movement promoted an “ideology of advocating for social change and greater respect from white Americans.”³⁴ It encouraged a renewed “sense of racial pride, cultural self-expression, economic independence, and progressive politics.”³⁵ It helped the NAACP to prosecute cases involving disenfranchisement, segregation ordinances, restrictive covenants, and lack of due process and equal protection in criminal cases.³⁶ The New Negro Movement also supported the transformation of African Americans from the “old” to the “new”, as thousands continued to move from the rural South to the industrial urban North. African Americans were looking to pursue a “new vision of social and economic opportunity.”³⁷

The movement from the rural South to the industrial urban North was not an easy decision for many African Americans. It had begun well-before the start of World War I as part

³³ Interview with historian Chad Williams. Jarret Bencks, “When World War I Ended, the Civil Rights Movement was just Getting Started,” November 13, 2018, <https://www.brandeis.edu/now/2018/november/world-war-one-african-americans.html>.

³⁴ “African-American Participation during World War I.”

³⁵ “NAACP: A century in the fight for Freedom: The New Negro Movement.” <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/naACP/the-new-negro-movement.html>.

³⁶ “NAACP: A century in the fight for Freedom: The New Negro Movement.”

³⁷ “NAACP: A century in the fight for Freedom: The New Negro Movement.”

of the Great Migration, but war, job opportunities, and racial violence continued to support the movement of blacks. African Americans wanted to get away from the violence and threats they were constantly facing. As African American soldiers started returning home, they believed they were going to be treated with some equality upon returning home, but instead they were met with more racism. However, the Great Migration movement pushed black troops returning home to be “determined to achieve a fuller participation in American society.”³⁸ With this new movement brought an increase of racial tension that erupted in the Summer of 1919. As part of larger anti-communist riots, white sailors and Marines attacked members of the black communities throughout Washington D.C., Charleston, and Chicago. These attacks were part of a series of white supremacist, racial, anti-immigrant, and anti-socialist riots that swept the country in 1919.³⁹ The racial tensions were prominent in the military and in the U.S. society and no matter how hard African Americans fought for their equality, it seemed like nothing was going to change how they were perceived in the eyes of white America’s ideology. Another example of the racial tensions during this time was in the summer and fall of 1919. This is when anti-black race riots erupted in twenty-six cities across the United States.⁴⁰ This caused an increase in the lynching of blacks, at least ten of the lynching in 1919 were war veterans, and some were lynched while in uniform.⁴¹ The war may have been over for the United States, but for African Americans living in the U.S., their fight was not close to being over.

³⁸ “NAACP: A century in the fight for Freedom: The New Negro Movement.”

³⁹ “African American Sailors in the U.S. Navy Chronology.”

⁴⁰ Jami Bryan, "FIGHTING FOR RESPECT: African-American Soldiers in WWI – The Campaign for the National Museum of the United States Army," <https://armyhistory.org/fighting-for-respect-african-american-soldiers-in-wwi/>.

⁴¹ Bryan, "FIGHTING FOR RESPECT: African-American Soldiers in WWI – The Campaign for the National Museum of the United States Army."

African Americans were not only fighting for equality at home, but also in the Navy. Until 1920, African Americans had been able to obtain the rank of petty officer in the Navy, but following World War I, African Americans could no longer obtain rank as a petty officer. The Navy did not want African Americans to rise the rank of petty officer because they believed white men could better lead a unit.⁴² Instead, enlisted African Americans could only enlist as mess attendants and could rise only to the position of officers' cook or steward, not being able to become a petty officer would remain the same in World War II.⁴³ On top of growing racial tensions, in 1922, the Navy Disarmament Agreement went into effect, causing the Navy to stop recruiting blacks.⁴⁴ This agreement was in the Washington Naval Treaty, also known as the Five-Point Treaty, that was signed during 1922 amongst the major Allies of World War I, in it, it agreed to prevent an arms race by limiting naval construction.⁴⁵ The Navy decided it was best to let the African Americans go and only kept those you were working in the messmen branch.⁴⁶ Many of the other military branches were also decreasing their troops, but starting with decreasing African Americans, until there was virtually no African Americans left. The men returning home believed they were finally going to gain equality, but instead met with more violence and were not allowed to be in any branch of the Navy than the messmen branch, this was a slap in the face for many African Americans who fought in a war for democracy, and yet they did not feel like democracy was given to them.

⁴² Byers, *A Study of the Negro in Military Service*, 29.

⁴³ Byers, *A Study of the Negro in Military Service*, 29.

⁴⁴ Wilson, *Jim Crow Joins Up: A Story of Negroes In The Armed Forces of the United*, 46.

⁴⁵ Allison Somogyi, "The Washington Naval Treaty," April 5, 2022, <https://usnhistory.navylive.dodlive.mil/Recent/Article-View/Article/2990124/the-washington-naval-treaty/>.

⁴⁶ Somogyi, "The Washington Naval Treaty."

As inclusion in the military decreased significantly for African Americans, back at home living conditions started to worsen for African Americans. By 1932, approximately half of African Americans were out of work.⁴⁷ Racial violence was on the rise and became more common, especially in the South.⁴⁸ The 1930s was not an ideal place for African Americans trying to gain equality. Many doors for them soon shut, whether that be in the military or in life. African Americans were soon being excluded throughout the nation.

At the same time, the U.S. Maritime Service was also closing its doors to blacks by quietly adopting a policy of excluding black seamen from jobs as firemen and coal passers on government transport ships.⁴⁹ The U.S. Maritime Service was established under the provision of the Merchant Marine Act of 1936 as a voluntary training organization to train individuals to become officers and crewman on merchant ships. Many merchant naval officers were once petty officers in the Navy and used their experience to rise in the ranks in the Maritime Service, but once the Navy stopped allowing blacks to become petty officers the Maritime Service stopped receiving black petty officers. Before 1940, African Americans could become a merchant marine naval officer, but when the Maritime Service closed its doors to African Americans, many could no longer become an officer. The Maritime Service decided to close the door to African Americans because the Navy was the one supplying these petty officers for the Maritime Service, and they did not want to burn a bridge with the Navy, so they decided to follow the Navy's lead. The Maritime Service also followed what the Navy was doing because the Maritime Service did not want to cause any racial tension, such as having blacks and whites

⁴⁷ "Race Relations in the 1930s and 1940s," Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/united-states-history-primary-source-timeline/great-depression-and-world-war-ii-1929-1945/race-relations-in-1930s-and-1940s/>.

⁴⁸ "Race Relations in the 1930s and 1940s."

⁴⁹ Byers, *A Study of the Negro in Military Service*, 29.

work side by side, so they followed the Navy in making the decision that blacks could not be able to become petty officers. The Maritime Service was never linked to the Navy in anyway, but with war lurking on the horizon, the Maritime Service realized that to show a united front in protecting the waters surrounding the U.S., they needed to follow the Navy's practices, regardless of still wanting to allow blacks as officers.

The experience of black soldiers during World War I continued to shape how the military treated black military service during the interwar years, but it also made African Americans more determined to fight for their equality despite facing so many setbacks that could have easily crushed their spirits and hopes for a more equal United States.

Chapter 2: The Move Towards Inclusion

As it became clear to President Franklin Roosevelt and others that the U.S. would be pulled into another World War in the late 1930s, conversations regarding black service in the military began. Each branch of the U.S. military wanted to make their own policies regarding recruitment so they would be able to regulate how many blacks were allowed in each branch and how they would serve, but this would result in continued inequality for African Americans. The solution to regulate how each branch enlisted African Americans into service was resolved on September 16, 1940, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed into law the Selective Training and Service Act. The Act was the first peacetime draft in American history, and it meant that African Americans were now able to register without being rejected from registering because every man between a certain age had to register for the draft. Whether the different branches wanted African Americans or not, there was a chance that African Americans would be drafted into the branch and there was nothing they could really do to stop them from being drafted. The Selective Training and Service Act of 1940 brought more opportunities for blacks to serve in the armed forces. The act required all men between ages 21 and 45 to register for the draft. This meant that eligible African Americans were now required to register to be drafted into the military service. Although this allowed them to be drafted, it did not mean that they were going to be accepted.

In 1940, every branch of U.S. Armed Forces were reluctant to accept blacks service members, but none were as vocal about their stance than the Navy. According to the Bureau of Navigation of the Navy Department of 1940, the Navy's "policy of not enlisting men of the colored race for any branch of the naval service except the messman branch was adopted to meet

the best interest of general efficiency.”⁵⁰ The Navy did not want any blacks to join the Navy as more than a messman, for them, they believed they did not need them.

The Selective Training and Service Act spoke on discrimination, it stated, “that in the selection and training of men under this act, and in the interpretation and execution of the provisions of that act, there shall be no discrimination against any person on an account of race or color.”⁵¹ Although this was clearly articulated in the document, there was no assurance of its enforcement, and the Navy capitalized on that point. For the first two years of the war, the Selective Service system had no effect on the Navy’s practices because they relied mostly on voluntary enlistments and did not need manpower from the system like the Army did. Their policies with regards to African Americans continued to be driven by racism as well as society. African American citizens were seen as the inferior race and the Navy decided to take the same viewpoint on African Americans. With the U.S. entrance into the war, the Navy was focused on rebuilding themselves from Pearl Harbor. They had a war to win and were trying not to change so many things at once. The Navy was in no place to change social relations, so avoiding black enlistment in the Navy could have been a way for the Navy to avoid these social pressures, while also trying to focus solely on the winning the war.

At the outbreak of World War II, Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox was determined to keep the discriminatory policies intact, this meant that African American were regulated to jobs as messmen. He, among others, had no interest in using war to advance civil rights. This was “presumably backed by his ranking advisers and by the large proportion of Southern officers in

⁵⁰ Byers, *A Study of the Negro in Military Service*, 29.

⁵¹ U.S. Congress. *United States Code: Selective Training and Service Act of, 50a U.S.C. §§ 302-315 Suppl. 1.* 1940. Periodical, 270, <https://www.loc.gov/item/uscode1940-005050a003/>.

the Navy.”⁵² Secretary Knox and the Navy took the attitude that it would be unthinkable “to consider allowing Negroes to enter its organization on an equal footing with white men.”⁵³ The Navy’s response to questions on the possibility of enlisting African Americans was, “the policy of not enlisting men of the colored race for any branch of the naval service but the messman branch was adopted to meet the best interests of general ship efficiency” it continues “this policy not only serves the best interest of the Navy and the country, but serves as well the best interest of themselves.”⁵⁴ In other words, the Navy believed that accepting African Americans for any branch other than the messman branch would create chaos on the ship and ruin the efficiency of the ship and the policy is in the best interest for everyone it could possibly effect. The Navy did not want to do anything that could potentially ruin their chances of winning the war. The Navy, just like General Staff in World War I, did not want to turn this war into one that would advance civil rights. They saw that the best interest for the Navy was to not engage in civil right activism for African Americans. Instead, the Navy adopted recruitment polices that aligned with Jim Crow polices and maintained a strict separation of the races.⁵⁵ The Navy continued segregating African Americans because they believed that it was better and probably easier than integrating whites and blacks or allowing them to go into other branches than just the messman branch. With segregation in American society during war, came a lot of hostility towards blacks and whites. They both wanted to win the war, but having whites and blacks integrate with each other on the battlefield and in the barracks could lead to tension between the two and effect the Navy’s

⁵² Byers, *A Study of the Negro in Military Service*, 441.

⁵³ Byers, *A Study of the Negro in Military Service*, 441.

⁵⁴ Byers, *A Study of the Negro in Military Service*, 441-443.

⁵⁵ Regina T. Akers, “African Americans in General Service, 1942,” Naval History and Heritage Command, May 10, 2019, <https://www.history.navy.mil/browse-by-topic/wars-conflicts-and-operations/world-war-ii/1942/manning-the-us-navy/african-americans-in-general-service--1942.html>.

efficiency. By keeping the two groups separate, it allowed the Navy to avoid engaging in civil right activism.

The Navy knew they could not avoid black inclusion much longer and would eventually have to allow blacks into the Navy. In July of 1941, Secretary of the Navy Knox created a committee called the Navy's General Board to view if changing policies to allow blacks to be more than messmen was acceptable. Their conclusion was that there was no discrimination in keeping blacks as only messmen because "Negroes' characteristics made them fit only for messman's duty."⁵⁶ They viewed African Americans as less than and that they were not capable of more than menial jobs. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, however, had the Bureau of Navigation board conduct their own investigation on the matter. The boards concluded that the "Navy's Negro policy was no more discriminatory than the general policy towards Negroes throughout the U.S.; therefore, no change in policy was needed."⁵⁷ They saw nothing wrong with how the Navy was conducting business with regards to African Americans. The thought of policies keeping blacks out of the military was common, as seen all throughout World War I and World War II, but African Americans continued vocalizing their anger, but very little came from doing so.

While many blacks were fighting for equality, many other people were fighting for African Americans to not have equal opportunity in the military. The Secretary of the Navy and his officers were relentless in keeping the segregation policies in place in the Navy. However, that was all about to change. As the war waged on, the need for manpower became prevalent.

⁵⁶ Richard M. Dalfiume, *Desegregation of the U.S. Armed Forces: Fighting on Two Fronts, 1939-1953* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1969), 53.

⁵⁷ Dalfiume, *Desegregation of the U.S. Armed Forces*, 54.

The Navy could not afford to reject thousands on men because of the color of their skins. Because of the need for more men and the newly accepted executive order, the Navy had no other option than to start accepting African Americans.

The other factor that led the Navy to accept more African American was the overwhelming amount of criticism and protest by blacks and white allies.⁵⁸ American lawyer and the 1940 Republican President nominee, Wendell Willkie, publicly condemned the “practice of restricting Negroes to menial ratings aboard Navy ships as a grave injustice and a reproach to the service.”⁵⁹ This brought to light every discriminatory policy and practice of the Navy to the Nation’s attention. This pressured the Navy to conform to democratic principles. This forced Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox to change every single Navy’s discriminatory policy, one by one. While the Navy was getting scrutinized by people such as Wendell Willkie, African Americans were also fighting for equality in the workplace. In the spring of 1941, black labor leader, Philip Randolph, threatened a mass march on Washington unless African Americans were hired equally to jobs in industries used more mobilization. Randolph stated, “it’s time to wake up Washington as it has never been shocked before.”⁶⁰ With fear of race riots and international embarrassment, Roosevelt established Executive Order 8802 in June 1941.⁶¹ This order established the Committee on Fair Employment Practices to receive and investigate discrimination complaints and take appropriate measures to handle this situation. If Secretary Knox kept pushing blacks away from the Navy or allow them to serve solely in the messman branch, this could have created a race riots, just like the one Roosevelt feared. It was easier for

⁵⁸ Byers, *A Study of the Negro in Military Service*, 445.

⁵⁹ Byers, *A Study of the Negro in Military Service*, 445.

⁶⁰ “The Civil Rights Act of 1964: A Long Struggle for Freedom,” <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/civil-rights-act/world-war-ii-and-post-war.html>

⁶¹ “The Civil Rights Act of 1964: A Long Struggle for Freedom.”

Knox, as well as the Navy, to start making changes in the policies that by nature led to discrimination.

The Selective Service Act of 1940 stated that “any person, regardless of race or color... shall be afforded an opportunity to volunteer for... the land and naval forces of the United States.”⁶² On December 7, 1941, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) decided to act; they pressed the White House and Secretary of the Navy Knox to accept African Americans for services other than stewards.⁶³ The bombing of Pearl Harbor provided further argument for African Americans to push the Navy to make changes regarding African Americans. The Navy needed men to man the ships and have a combatant role, and African American men were ready to do so, if the Navy made the changes necessary. With the issue of race being on the forefront of a two-front war, such as the Double Victory Campaign that was launched by the Courier in 1942, that began a rally cry for black journalists, activist, and citizens to secure both victory over fascism abroad and victory over racism at home, President Roosevelt pressed Secretary of the Navy Knox for a compromise solution.

In January of 1942, Knox then asked the Navy’s General Board that was composed of naval and Marine Corps officers, and Addison Walker, a civilian special assistant to Assistant Secretary of the Navy Ralph Bard to submit plans for African Americans to serve outside of the steward branch, but these new plans reinforced prevalent racial views towards African Americans to remain in messman branch. The committee concluded that allowing blacks to serve in other branches outside on the steward branch in the Navy would disrupt naval operations.⁶⁴

⁶² *United States Code: Selective Training and Service Act of, 50a U.S.C. §§ 302-315 Suppl. 1.* 1940, Periodical, 270.

⁶³ Frank Jr. Blazich, “Building for a Nation and for Equality: African American Seabees in World War II,” U.S. Navy Seabee Museum, January 31, 1970, <https://seabeemuseum.wordpress.com/category/black-seabees/>.

⁶⁴ Akers, “African Americans in General Service, 1942.”

Thus, the Navy's General Board shared with Knox similar opinions on the service of black seamen and little changed. President Roosevelt was unimpressed and requested Knox to reevaluate the plans. In late February, Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Harold R. Stark recommended that African Americans could be rated in the construction battalions. Admiral Stark issued a report stating, "If, however, men of the colored race are to be enlisted in the Navy in ratings other than in the messman branch, CNO recommends their enlistment in the Reserve, and their assignment to (1) Construction Battalions under the Bureau of Yards and Docks; (2) Shore Stations, for work around docks or general labor such as now performed by enlisted men."⁶⁵ African American men gained more opportunities with Admiral Stark's report. In his report, he stated that African Americans could now be rated in the Navy's branches, other than the messmen branches, this was a huge steppingstone because it meant that they were not just subjected to one branch that was seen as inferior to the others. It also meant that African Americans serving in the Navy's branches would be able to have better pay opportunities that could help them economically and socially and it would increase blacks fighting on the frontlines.

The attack on Pearl Harbor changed things for the United States and its military with respect to allowing African Americans to serve in more combatant roles than just messmen or have menial jobs, they needed more manpower and the only way to get more manpower was to allow blacks to serve and have a more combat role in the war. Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9279 on December 5, 1942. This order stopped all voluntary enlistment of men between 18 and 38 years of age and required the U.S.

⁶⁵ "WWII Black Seabees," Naval History and Heritage Command, September 9, 2021, <https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/museums/seabee/explore/online-reading-room/historic-topics0/WWII-Black-seabees.html>.

Armed Forces to secure manpower through the Selective Service system.⁶⁶ This meant that the Navy could no longer disregard black entrance into the Navy because they could no longer rely on voluntary enlistment because it was stopped. The Navy was now required to secure manpower through the Selective Service, where they could no longer deny blacks.

The Navy did not appreciate Executive Order 9279, this was not because they had to enlist men from the system, but because the Navy was forced to enlist black men from the system. The Navy relied heavily on voluntary enlistment, but since President Roosevelt ended voluntary enlistment and activated the Selective Service, the Navy could no longer turn away African Americans. The Selective Service Act already made other branches enlist blacks as the other branches lacked manpower, but the Navy was different. Unlike the Army, the Navy had enough men to avoid taking in blacks, but Executive Order 9279 required the Navy to take all draftees, including blacks. Executive Order 9279 was put into motion to provide the most effective mobilization and utilization of the national manpower, this meant African Americans would need to be in the Navy for additional manpower and effectiveness. With the Navy fighting in the Pacific and the Atlantic, all available men were needed to fight a two-front war. To deal with the influx of blacks in the Navy, they instituted strict policies regarding blacks; this was because the Navy believed blacks would cause problems in the branch and believed they were only good for labor and messmen duties and having black servicemen in other areas of the Navy would create havoc on how the Navy operated.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Executive Order 9279- Providing for the Most Effective Mobilization and Utilization of the National Manpower and Transferring the Selective Service System to the War Manpower Commission," December 5, 1942, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/executive-order-9279-providing-for-the-most-effective-mobilization-and-utilization-the>.

⁶⁷ Byers, *A Study of the Negro in Military Service*, 441-443.

On April 7, 1942, Secretary Knox announced the first change in Naval policy concerning blacks since the years following World War I. The policy offered “blacks the opportunity to volunteer for duty in the general service of the reserve components of the Navy, Marines Corps, and the Coast Guard. Training was to be segregated and assignments would be made to shore installations and harbor craft” and took effect on June 1, 1942.⁶⁸ The Navy also announced that they would enlist African Americans for the general service, with open enlistment for messman as well as the Seabees.⁶⁹ It would take the Navy until March of 1943 to conform to the Army’s plan of accepting blacks up to 10% of its manpower.⁷⁰ President Roosevelt was informed of the Navy’s policy and agreed that blacks should be segregated into separate regiments. His statement read, “the policy of the War Department is not to intermingle colored and white enlisted personnel in the same regimental organizations. This policy has proved satisfactory over a long period of years and to make changes would produce situations destructive to morale and detrimental to the preparations for national defense.”⁷¹ So, while Executive Order 8802 banned discriminatory employment practices by federal agencies and all unions and companies engaged in war-related work, Roosevelt and each branch of the military supported the continuation of segregated troops. As a matter of fact, the Navy considered the acceptance of black seamen in jobs beyond messman strictly experimental and made no promises as to what would happen after these experiments. Starting February of 1943, the Selective Service began to induct blacks into

⁶⁸ Finkle, *Forum for Protest: Black Press During World War II*, 160.

⁶⁹ Blazich, “Building for a Nation and for Equality.”

⁷⁰ Finkle, *Forum for Protest: Black Press During World War II*, 94.

⁷¹ C.L.R. James, George Breitman, Edgar Keemer, et. Al, *Fighting Racism in World War II* (N.Y.: Monad Press, 1980), 85.

the Navy and the Navy had to figure out a plan on how to use all the African Americans now enlisted in the Navy.⁷²

This move was a small win for African Americans, but still fell flat of black's expectations.⁷³ Despite the signs of changes and response to pressure, the Navy adamantly maintained a racial bias during World War II. However, their experiment did lead to a change of policy regarding race segregation that they so proudly maintained. One of the experiments that helped with the shift was to allow blacks to join the Naval Construction Battalion, also known as the Seabees. This resulted in the creation of several segregated Seabee battalions and later, two integrated Seabee battalions, the 34th and 80th construction battalions. While this change would later bring unforeseen progressive changes to the U.S. Navy policies and the relationship with African American, it was in many respects, pragmatic as we will see in the next chapters.

⁷² Byers, *A Study of the Negro in Military Service*, 41.

⁷³ Finkle, *Forum for Protest: Black Press During World War II*, 94.

Chapter 3: The Creation of the Seabees

Before the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, the Navy used civilian and foreign contractors to help with construction projects, such as building bases and airfields, roads, bridges, and other facilities for the United States government and the Navy. During the Depression, President Roosevelt created the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) as part of the administration New Deal projects. From 1933 to 1942, the CCC was a voluntary government work relief program for unemployed, unmarried men. The program supplied manual labor jobs related to the conservation and development of natural resources. But more importantly, the CCC was designed for young men to get a job and offer some relief to families who had difficulty finding work during the Depression. The CCC provided the Navy with civilian contractors to help on construction projects; these contractors were not bound by the Navy's rules, nor did they need to conduct themselves as other seamen would on the job. At the end of the day, they were civilians, not soldiers. The Navy did not need seamen to do their labor work since they had workers from the CCC, however, the attack on Pearl Harbor changed the Navy's position on the use of civilian contractors. The Navy needed to rebuild their fleet with soldiers, not civilians in the opinion of Rear Admiral Ben Moreell and he had his own solution to rebuild the Navy's fleet.

Rear Admiral Ben Moreell believed it was best for the Navy to have their own seamen who could soldier and be construction workers and not use civilians. This was because even during peacetime the use of civilian construction workers for advance base work came with some handicaps. Since the men were not part of the military organization, they were not subjected to military discipline; meaning, if one of them did not want to work, for any reason, he risked no

more than loss of pay and job.⁷⁴ In a December 1941 letter from Moreell to the Chief of the Bureau, the Rear Admiral outlined the importance of creating a Naval construction battalion, “it is becoming increasingly apparent that the service of contractors and civilian workers under them cannot be utilized for advanced base construction work in combat zone. Such construction work can only be accomplished satisfactorily by the utilization of military personnel under direct military command.”⁷⁵ He continues, “Directives which have been issues, the scope of which will probably be increased as the present war progresses indicates that early steps should be taken towards the organization of such military construction forces if they are to be trained and available at the times their service will be required.”⁷⁶ As war became more apparent for the U.S., Moreell realized that the U.S. was going to need a construction battalion that was able to defend themselves and their projects in times of war and realized that civilian construction workers had no place in a combat zone.⁷⁷ He outlined his plan on how to use these construction battalions and figured out the logistics of these battalions, such as how many men would be in each battalion, what type of jobs they would be doing, and how to train the men.⁷⁸ However, despite his determination to activate, organize, and man Navy construction units, this idea was rejected by the Chief of the Bureau of Navigation.

Moreell’s plan was rejected because the need for Navy construction units were not seen as important since civilian construction workers were already in use by the Navy. The attack on Pearl Harbor, fundamentally changed opinions, such as the Chief of the Bureau of Navigation as

⁷⁴ William Bradford Huie, *Can Do! : The Story of the Seabees* (The P-47 Press, 2018), 66.

⁷⁵ Chief of the Bureau of Yards and Docks to Chief of the Bureau of Navigation, December 1941, <https://seabeemuseum.files.wordpress.com/2015/02/creation-of-the-seabees.pdf>.

⁷⁶ Chief of the Bureau of Yards and Docks to Chief of the Bureau of Navigation, December 1941.

⁷⁷ Germinsky, “The Fighting Seabees,” 1.

⁷⁸ Chief of the Bureau of Yards and Docks to Chief of the Bureau of Navigation, December 1941.

well as Commander in Chief, Chester Nimitz, who supported the Civil Construction Crews. 2,000 miles from Pearl Harbor, Wake Island was simultaneously attacked by Japanese infantry. On Wake Island about 1,100 United States soldiers attempted to defend themselves against 2,500 Japanese.⁷⁹ However, U.S. soldiers were not the only ones occupying the island, the Navy had civilian construction workers on the island. As civilian construction workers, they were not issued any weapons, they had no way to protect themselves against the Japanese nor could they protect what they built. Further complicating their position in what was now an active war zone. The civilian contract workers could be executed as guerillas under the terms of the Geneva Convention if they took up arms and started firing at the Japanese. By international law, civilian workers could not be armed, leaving them to rely on the Navy for protection. Since the Navy was occupied with the Japanese attacking them, the construction workers were trapped in a combat zone and had no way to defend themselves. Those who were not killed were taken prisoner and those who were physically able to work were forced to complete their projects and maintain them for Japanese use.⁸⁰ All of the remaining civilian workers were executed by a firing squad despite not being armed, nor posing any threat to the Japanese garrison on the island.⁸¹

The tragedy of the civilian contractors on Wake Island led the Navy to reconsider Rear Admiral Moreell's plan to form a military unit composed of construction and engineer specialists.⁸² It was organized in March 1942. The unit would be called the Naval Construction

⁷⁹ James W. Wensyel, "Battle of Wake Island," History.net, November 2001, <https://www.historynet.com/battle-of-wake-island/#:~:text=The%20tiny%20Pacific%20island%20of,defense%20of%20their%20important%20base.e%20Of%20Wake%20Island%20|%20HistoryNet.>

⁸⁰ "The Forsaken Defenders of Wake Island," July 8, 2019, <https://www.history.navy.mil/browse-by-topic/wars-conflicts-and-operations/world-war-ii/1941/philippines/defenders-of-wake.html>.

⁸¹ Robert A. Germinsky, "The Fighting Seabees," Navy & Marine Corps WWII Commemorative Committee, Navy Office of Information, 1994, 1, <https://discovery-ebSCO-com.libproxy.chapman.edu/linkprocessor/plink?id=111477b2-4636-3477-993a-839b6d3db737>.

⁸² Germinsky, "The Fighting Seabees," 1.

Battalion, also known as the Seabees; in honor of a bee because it was both a builder and a fighter. Many of the men who initially worked for the Navy as civilian contractors became Seabees. The newly organized Seabee battalions “demanded a great number of officers and trained, experienced ‘know-how’, ‘can-do’ men.”⁸³

According to journalist and public relations officer, William Huie, who was overseas with the Seabees in 1943 and who later worked closely with preserving the Seabees history, the Navy saw the Seabees as being “born in the hours of terrible emergency just after Pearl Harbor. Men with a lot of mechanical know-how in their hands had to be rushed to the Pacific islands; men who could fight jungles as well as Japs; men who were accustomed to loneliness and danger; men who could go into battle, if necessary, with little or no military training.”⁸⁴ The Seabees were quite different from other branches in the military. The average age of enlistment for other branches in the military was between 21 and 45. The Seabees enlistment age was between 18 and 50, but many men past 50 managed to sneak their way in. The average age of a Seabee was 37. The recruitment process was also different, while other units did not focus much on skills, the Seabees made that their number one priority. The Seabees’ recruitment ads emphasized the need for engineering and construction skills of any sort. All the men recruited and assigned to the Seabees had to have some sort of education or work history in engineering or construction. This was because education and experience were important to the Seabees because they needed men with very specific skills to do the work, they needed done. While being in the Seabees, all of the men were increasing their skills and because of this, each sailor, regardless of color, would be able to increase their skills that could used later in life to get jobs. Because

⁸³ *Building the Navy's Bases in World War II: Volume 1, Part 1*, (United States Government printing officer, Washington, DC, 1947), 71.

⁸⁴ Huie, *Can Do!: The Story of the Seabees*, 26.

African Americans were able to join the Seabees and have an opportunity to increase their skills as a builder or electricians, they were able to create a better future for themselves. Education and experience became an important factor for the Civil Engineer Corps officers helping create the requirements for the Seabees, so they were able to create new qualifications for each Seabee rank and rate to recruit civilians into the units. Because of the skills required of the men joining the Seabees, they would be paid a lot more than any other branch. The average pay and allowances for the Seabees totaled to \$140 a month; this made the Seabees one of the highest paid groups in the military service.⁸⁵ This made the Seabee appealing to many men, especially African American men. More money meant they were able to better themselves economically and it would also ease the stress of money their families had at home. When these men got to training camp, they were interviewed, and asked questions focused on certain duties and jobs/ranks to see where they would fit. Some of these questions were “would you be able to pull a 3-foot diameter stump with caterpillar 60, and how would you set the machine to do so” or “name two knots used to tie together the ends of rope to make a safe hitch for scaffolding.”⁸⁶ Having experience or an education in engineering or construction helped both white and African Americans receive a higher rank/ job within the Seabees. This was because the most important requirement in the Seabees was to have education or experience in either engineering or construction.

On a May 21, 1943, the *Toledo Union Journal* published a one-page recruitment ad detailing the requirement to become a Seabees. In bold letters it read “Build, Fight with the Seabees” and listed everything a Seabee was (a fighter and a builder), the training needed, the

⁸⁵ *Building the Navy's Bases in World War II: Volume 1, Part 1*, 135.

⁸⁶ Jennifer Johnson, “Archivist’s Attic-Seabees, Classifications, & Life Skills During WWII,” <https://seabeesmuseum.wordpress.com/2017/06/21/archivists-attic-seabees-classifications-life-skills-during-wwii/>.

skills you needed, and requirements.⁸⁷ The requirements to join the Seabees were far less rigorous in terms of soldering compared to the requirements of other military branches. Some requirements included: native born American or proof of their own or their parents naturalization, at least 5 feet, 2 inches in height and weight in proportion, both married and unmarried men were accepted, and education had to be beyond a simple aptitude test, but there was no specific education or mental requirements.⁸⁸ The Navy needed more men for the construction side of the war rather than the active combat role. Therefore, it needed mechanics, steel workers, welders, and many other construction workers.

One important detail about the Seabee's recruitment process, however, was the statement that the men's rating would depend on their skills. The Seabee's recruitment ads did not state that African Americans could not join or that their rating would be based on the color of their skin. The recruitment ad stated, "immediately upon joining the Seabees, you are given a rating in your specialty." "This rating may be high as Chief Petty Officer, depending on your age and ability."⁸⁹ African Americans believed that they could potentially reach the rank of petty officer and lead a white battalion; however, this was not the reality.⁹⁰ African Americans would not attain petty officer status until the later part of the war and even then, there was less than 20 African Americans to rise to the rank of petty officer in the Navy. When the Bureau of Naval Personnel declared that "all enlisted rates are open to Negroes", it was assumed by many that African Americans would receive the same chances for promotion in the enlisted ranks as the

⁸⁷ "Toledo Union Journal. [Volume] (Toledo, Ohio) 1942-Current, May 21, 1943, Image 3." News about Chronicling America RSS. U.A.W.-C.I.O. Local no. 12, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn82007637/1943-05-21/ed-1/seq-3/#date1=1777&index=8&rows=20&words=Seabee+Seabees&searchType=basic&sequence=0&state=&date2=1963&proxtext=seabees+&y=0&x=0&dateFilterType=yearRange&page=1>.

⁸⁸ "Toledo Union Journal. [Volume] (Toledo, Ohio) 1942-Current, May 21, 1943, Image 3."

⁸⁹ "Toledo Union Journal. [Volume] (Toledo, Ohio) 1942-Current, May 21, 1943, Image 3."

⁹⁰ Blazich, "Building for a Nation and for Equality."

other soldier.⁹¹ A letter written by African American Sol R. Lancy, addresses his disappointment in the rating promises, he states, “when I first came into the Navy, they gave me a lot of promises. Those promises were lies.”⁹² He was promised that African Americans would be equal in promotion, assignments, and opportunities in the combat zone. These promises were never made for most African Americans and many, like Lancy, felt like the Navy lied to them to get them to join the Seabees.⁹³ This was also the case for Eugene Mitchelson MM2, who detailed his experience as a Seabee who had skills and was trained in Aircraft Mechanics, but his skills were not being used and did not help him in his rating. In a letter his mother wrote to the Navy, she states, “it is such a sheer waste of the services of one who has spent so much time and effort to learn a skill which must most certainly be of great value to our country at this particular time to use him in this unskilled capacity.”⁹⁴ The Navy did not apply their policies as much as they promised to and it caused many African Americans to reflect and write to the NAACP and the Navy about their disgust in the lies they were told. African Americans wrote to the NAACP because they felt like their voice would be heard and fought for and the NAACP took it upon themselves to be the group who fought for civil rights, but also African American men believed that because they were fighting for democracy abroad, then they should have democracy for themselves in the United States. The NAACP was successful in having the African American voice be heard. One of their accomplishments during the war was to push President Roosevelt to establish black service members in every major branch of the armed service.⁹⁵ Because of the

⁹¹ Byers, *A Study of the Negro in Military Service*, 457.

⁹² Sol R. Lancy to Dr. White, (no date), Paper of the NAACP: Part 9. Discrimination in the U.S. Armed Forces, Series B 1940-1950.

⁹³ Sol R. Lancy to Dr. White, (no date),

⁹⁴ Eugene was attached to the 21st special battalion, special battalions were used for stevedore duty. February 8, 1944. Paper of the NAACP: Part 9. Discrimination in the U.S. Armed Forces, Series B 1940-1950, 2.

⁹⁵ “African American Soldiers during World War II.” <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/naacp/world-war-ii-and-the-post-war-years.html#obj3>.

NAACP immense involvement with the black community, many African Americans felt acknowledge and felt like someone was finally willing to help them fight for equality. Being rated for your ability rather than the color of your skin in today's world would be obvious, but for African Americans during World War II, this was a newer concept in the military, at least for the Navy.

The Seabees moto was "We Build, We Fight" and the spirit of "Can Do." The Seabees focused on building bases and anything else the Navy needed. They were also trained to be combat soldiers because of the experience of the civilian construction workers at Wake Island. Yet, their combat training was less advance than most branches, this was because their focus was to build rather than fight the enemy, but, if need be, they had some skill in combat to defend themselves. Since they were attached to Marines when going into a combat zone, receiving basic training allowed them to defend themselves.⁹⁶ To ensure men could be able to defend themselves, they were assigned a marine training instructor to train them in a fast, less strenuous, and efficient way. They were also trained by sailors to understand the way in which ships were run; it was a joint effort to prepare these men for war. These recruits received "six weeks of advanced military and technical training, underwent a considerable amount of unit training, and then shipped to an overseas assignment."⁹⁷ Their training included practicing different drills; one of these drills prepared them for enemy air attack. They marched and did troops movement as if under fire, and one of these was to lay flat on their stomach with their face in the dirt and on

⁹⁶ *Building the Navy's Bases in World War II: Volume 1, Part 1*, 15.

⁹⁷ "Seabee History: Formation of the Seabees and World War II". Naval History and Heritage Command, April 16, 2015, <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/s/seabee-history0/world-war-ii.html>.

command crawled forward by using only their elbows.⁹⁸ They attended the shooting range to get familiar with different weapons and their accuracy. The Seabees training was not intended to mold them into Marines or combat Seamen, but rather to convey the bare minimum in understanding the weapons and how to use them in order to defend themselves against the enemy.⁹⁹ The focus was to make these men building machines, not combat soldiers.

While the Seabees participated in Marine-like combat and defense training they also attended college level classes to sharpen their knowledge and received college credits for these classes. Receiving college credit for these classes helped many Seabees on the path to receive a degree, but this was largely true for only white Seabees. There are no known documents precisely stating that African Americans received a degree or college credits. In a letter written to the NAACP by the mother of 21st Special Seabee battalion Eugene Todd Mitchelson, she stated that he joined the Seabees to “serve his country in the capacity that his training had best fitted him for” but after his training in combat and education, he was never given a chance. She concludes, “how much couldn’t be saved in dollars and cents to say nothing of the superior caliber of the services of an individual who didn’t receive his training under the necessary speeded-up conditions of wartime training courses, if the services of those who had already received training from a recognized educational institution could be put to use.”¹⁰⁰ The mother of Eugene felt like it was a waste of his time and military resources to use him and his skills in unloading cargo, when he could be building bases or help repair aircrafts.

⁹⁸ George Clazie to Dorothy Clazie, 17 July 1942, Clazie (George) World War II Correspondence (2017.424.w.r.), Center for American War Letters, Chapman University, CA.

⁹⁹ Clazie to Dorothy, 24 July 1942, Clazie Correspondence.

¹⁰⁰ Rosa Mitchelson to Walter White, 2.

African Americans were not originally intended to serve with the Seabees when it was created in March 1942. However, President Roosevelt pressured Secretary of the Navy Knox and insisted that the Navy find rated positions for black enlistees. The Chief of Naval Operation Admiral Harold R. Stark came to the aid of President Roosevelt and insisted that African Americans could be rated in their assignments in the Seabees. By June of 1942, African Americans started enlisting in the Navy as Seabees and could enlist for general service. Enlistment grew quickly and reportedly, by February 1, 1943, there were about 2,020 African American men who enlisted into the Seabees.¹⁰¹ Black men were willing and waiting to serve and as soon as they were allowed to, they enlisted in the Navy. It was also an opportunity for blacks to serve in a different branch than just messman. It was an opportunity for them to show the Navy that they are more than just messmen. The creation of the Seabees and black enlistment into the Seabees were only months apart. Secretary of the Navy Knox had little time to figure out how including African Americans into the Seabees would affect the Navy and the men who were not used to working with African Americans, which proves that the Navy need for manpower was greater than their opinions regarding blacks. Regardless, the Navy made sure to introduce policies to help fight discrimination these men might face in the Seabees, such as equality in promotion and assignments, however, these policies did not help African American Seabees be equal in promotion or assignments. These policies made the men believe they were going to be protected, to an extent, against racial discrimination. This was not the case and soon the NAACP would be flooded with complaints because of these policies failures.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ “WWII Black Seabees.”

¹⁰² NAACP 1940-55. Legal File. “U.S. Navy Seamen Trouble, Part 9. Discrimination in the U.S. Armed Forces, Series B 1940-1950.” N.d. (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1989).

In April 1942, the Bureau of Yards and Docks, responsible for building and maintaining navy yards, drydocks, and other facilities relating to ship construction, maintenance, and repair, began active recruitment of black men for mostly segregated construction battalions. By September, 880 African American men from 37 states reported to camp Allen near Norfolk, Virginia to begin training. The Bureau of Yards and Docks decided to use Southern White men to command the all blacks new units, and they were chosen “for their ability and knowledge in handling African Americans, but also received orders to treat all personnel without difference in regards to promotions and assignments.”¹⁰³ The Navy assumed that white-southern officers would be fit to run a unit composed of both black and white men, but many blacks were hesitant about this because they felt like they would not be treated equally. However, since many African Americans were not petty officers, they could not oversee units, so their only option was to have white officers in command of the black units. Many wanted northern-white men to command their battalions, but the Navy saw white-southerners more fit for the job because they were used to dealing with African Americans.¹⁰⁴ African American Seabees’ assumption of northern-white men was that they were not racist or were less racist as southern-white men, however, there was northern-white men who were just as racist as southern-white men, but for African American Seabees northern-white men were going to give them more equality in promotions and assignments.¹⁰⁵

The Navy viewed white-southern men capable of running a successful African American battalion because they would be able to work with African American men more efficient than

¹⁰³ Blazich, “Building for a Nation and for Equality.”

¹⁰⁴ Blazich, “Building for a Nation and for Equality.”

¹⁰⁵ Blazich, “Building for a Nation and for Equality.”

other people could.¹⁰⁶ Since almost 80% of the blacks enlisted men were from the South, Rear Admiral Ben Moreell and other Senior Bureau of Yards and Docks leaders believed the arrangements of using Southern white men to command the units would help produce a “crack battalion, one which will be proud of themselves and to the Seabees.”¹⁰⁷ The Navy intended blacks to be treated equal despite the racism that was lingering in the Navy and the United States. Despite Secretary Knox push back to enlist blacks into the Seabees from the start, he was motivated by the pressure of President Roosevelt, the Federal government, and civilians to enlist African Americans and have them be treated equal; even with this added pressure to make sure these two things happened, African American Seabees were still facing inequality.

Roosevelt desired a wide dispersion of African Americans throughout the shore establishments; this meant that they would be working to create, maintain, and support the Operating Forces by building, repairing, and equipping of the ships of the Navy and in general, seeing to their logistic readiness for combat duty.¹⁰⁸ The Bureau of Naval Personnel struggled for several months with the distribution of African American draftees. While this was going on Secretary Knox told President Roosevelt that the Navy would continue to segregate African Americans and restrict their service to certain occupations. With the increase of African American strength, twenty-seven new African American Seabee battalions were created in the late summer and fall of 1942, some of which had African Americans served overseas as stevedores. The creation of twenty-seven new African American Seabee battalions, meant that

¹⁰⁶ Blazich, “Building for a Nation and for Equality.”

¹⁰⁷ Blazich, “Building for a Nation and for Equality.”

¹⁰⁸ Transcribed by Patrick Clancey. Julius Augustus Furer “Hyper War: Administration of the Navy Department in World War II,” 518, <https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Admin-Hist/USN-Admin/USN-Admin-13.html>.

more African Americans could join the Seabees, and this resulted in over 7,000 new black Seabees.¹⁰⁹

Special Seabee Battalions were made up of many black or other minority men while others were only composed of white seamen. The Navy assigned the word “special battalion” to most Seabee battalions composed of all African Americans, there would be sixteen Special Seabee Battalions by the end of World War II.¹¹⁰ Special Seabee Battalions were composed of stevedores and longshoremen who were used in unloading of the ships in combat zone.¹¹¹ The Special Battalions were hardly used to construct military bases or buildings. The Special Battalions were called upon to perform other vital roles in the war effort in addition to construction work including, unloading vast quantities of food, ammunition, and other supplies that had to be transferred from ships to different battalions.¹¹² Special Battalion highlights how the Navy continued to rely of race segregation for black seamen by sidelining them to work as stevedores and longshoremen.

Over 12,500 African Americans served in Seabee units in the Atlantic and Pacific theaters during World War II.¹¹³ During the war these men built advance bases and offloaded cargo, but also helped remove many racist white-southern officers in their battalions, paving the road towards complete integration of the Navy. The Navy viewed African Americans as only

¹⁰⁹ Michael Shawn Davis, ““Many of them are among my best men: The United States Navy Looks at its African American Crewmen, 1755-1955” (Dissertation, Kansas State University, 2011), 80, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/5170826.pdf>.

¹¹⁰ “Special Naval Construction Battalions,” <https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/museums/seabee/explore/seabee-unit-histories/specials.html#:~:text=These%20special%20battalions%20were%20composed,in%20the%20Civil%20Engineer%20Corps.>

¹¹¹ “Special Naval Construction Battalions.”

¹¹² *Building the Navy's Bases in World War II: Volume 1, Part 1*, 145.

¹¹³ Blazich, “Building for a Nation and for Equality.”

being useful for menial/labor jobs, and not capable of fighting in the war. Secretary of the Navy Knox made sure the Navy instituted policies that prevented African Americans access to join other branches, other than messmen in the early mobilization effort and in the early years of the war. Because of social pressure, President Roosevelt and others stepped in and made the Navy create new policies designed to recruit African Americans to other units within the Navy. The events at Pearl Harbor, essentially eliminated the U.S. Navy Pacific fleet, led the Navy and Secretary Knox to feel stunned by the incident and began searching for manpower for the war efforts. The broader use of African Americans was one avenue to expand Naval manpower, but if it was up to Secretary Knox, African Americans would only serve as a messman, regardless of the need for manpower. Knox knew that the only way to win in the Pacific was to recruit African Americans for manpower, however, Knox, as well as President Roosevelt, still wanted those men to be segregated. Regardless of segregation, African American Seabees had a chance to prove their skills and capability to contribute to the war. While the Navy still had a long way to go with African American equality, African American Seabees challenged and changed how the Navy dealt with the inequalities African Americans faced, as we will examine in the next chapter.

Chapter 4: The Tale of Two Seabee Battalions

With the exception of two regular construction battalions that served with distinction in the Pacific, the 34th and 80th, African American Seabees, were relegated to what would be known as “special” battalions stevedoring cargo and supplies.¹¹⁴ Many of these “special” battalions would not see combat or leave the United States to serve. Although Secretary of the Navy Knox announced African Americans would be separate from the whites in the construction battalions, he allowed the formation of two integrated battalions. This was solely experimental and was believed would not have much impact on the Navy or in society, with regards to equality and integration of blacks and white in the United States. It was simply to see if blacks could work well with whites and vice versa. Instead, this experiment became wildly successful in showing blacks and whites could coexist together and surprisingly successful for black equality.

The 34th and 80th battalion had great success in the war, but when looking at the equality among the men, one could see that it was, in reality, nonexistence and unsuccessful. In the examples of the 34th and 80th Naval Construction Battalion, equality for the African Americans attached to the battalions turned out to be an utter fail. In both battalions, African Americans were not treated equal with regards promotions or assignments. Many African Americans wrote letters to the NAACP complaining and explaining how they were not treated fair in promotions and assignments and mentioned that having a Southern white man command the battalion was leading to this inequality. They expressed that they much rather have an African American man or a northern-white man to command the battalion because they would understand how to work efficiently with African Americans and treat the African Americans fairly when promoting the

¹¹⁴ Davis, ““Many of them are among my best men,” 80.

men and assigning them to different jobs in the battalion.¹¹⁵ They believed white-southern men were not the best fit for their battalions and wanted a change so they could be treated fairly and do the job they enlisted for.

Although the Navy remained committed generally to segregated units with the Seabees, the two experimental integrated units highlight the ways that the U.S. Navy understood the importance of war manpower over race segregation. This was because after Pearl Harbor, the Navy lost a big portion of their fleet and needed to replace the manpower they lost to the Japanese. They did so, by allowing African Americans to serve in other branches, such as the Seabees. The two experimental battalions, 34th and 80th, also showed the Navy how well African Americans and whites could work together, thus pushing the Navy to become open to the possibilities of integrating more Seabee units.

The 34th Naval Construction Battalion

The 34th Naval Construction Battalion was commissioned on October 24, 1942, which shipped out of Port Hueneme, CA for the Pacific. The 34th battalion was the first Naval Construction Battalion to form under the new regulations which permitted blacks in the Seabees. The black Seabees in the battalion were highly skilled in a wide range of 50 different trades, which included electricians, carpenters, black smiths, painters, riggers, draftsmen, and steelworkers.¹¹⁶ By January 5, 1943, the battalion was composed of 880 black Seabees, 280 white Seabees and 26 officers.¹¹⁷ White and black men were almost always separated in the

¹¹⁵ Paper of the NAACP: Part 9. Discrimination in the U.S. Armed Forces.

¹¹⁶ “WWII Black Seabees.”

¹¹⁷ Sometimes the military counted anyone not black- such as Asian American, Latin Americans, and Native Americans- as White. 34th Naval Construction Battalion Cruise Log, 2, <https://www.history.navy.mil/content/dam/museums/Seabee/UnitListPages/NCB/034%20NCB.pdf>.

military, so having these two groups work together was something profound, especially when there were ongoing racial tensions. This creation of the 34th battalion constituted a significance shift in the Navy's previous practices of having blacks not be able to work with whites and only having blacks work in menial positions.

To replenish the Navy's fleet, the Navy needed to assign African Americans to other branches than just the messmen branch. They needed men to fight against the Japanese and by allowing African Americans to work with white seamen, it helped expand the Naval manpower and puts more men on the ground. The Navy did everything they thought they could do to make sure this battalion was successful. This was because advocates for civil rights were watching the battalion to make sure that blacks were treated equally. The Navy also wanted to show that they were not only committed to the success of the battalion but that the Navy was stronger than ever, after the attack on Pearl Harbor. They did this through having southern white officers treat all personnel without difference regarding promotions and assignments.¹¹⁸ This was guaranteed by the Bureau of Yards and Docks when they announced blacks being able to enlist in the Navy for other units than only messmen, however, it was never fully guaranteed since they just told officers to treat blacks equal and never had them sign anything to ensure this would happen. Secretary Knox tried to ensure that blacks be treated equal by holding a press conference on April 7, 1942, explaining that blacks should be treated equal despite their race.¹¹⁹ The Navy shifted their mentality on equality with the Seabees because many African Americans in this unit were skilled craftsmen, and their skill was going to be needed to win the war. Without their skills

¹¹⁸ Blazich, "Building for a Nation and for Equality."

¹¹⁹ Press Conference held by Secretary Knox. Frank Knox, "Negroes in the U.S. Navy." April 7, 1942. <https://ncisahistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Negroes-in-the-U.S.-Navy-Press-Conference-Held-by-Secretary-Knox-07-April-1942.pdf>.

the Navy could not have a successful operation, the Navy's focus was to win the war and if African Americans were going to help them, then they wanted the African Americans in the Seabees to be successful in their work.

The 34th battalion, just like other Seabee battalions, consisted of four companies and a headquarters. The four companies comprised all the skills necessary to complete any construction task to which the unit was assigned and included plumbing, deep sea diving (for welding in the ocean), electricians, crane operators, and so on.¹²⁰ The battalion was created at Norfolk, Virginia, and left Norfolk on November 15, 1942, for first, Gulfport, Mississippi and finally Port Hueneme, California on December 3, 1942. At Port Hueneme, the men began training and by January 7, 1943, the unit was transferred to the Pacific Theater.¹²¹ This would be the first time a Naval integrated battalion would be on front lines in World War II. The naval leaders wanted, "as much as the men do, to make this first group of Negro Seabees one of the best battalions to leave the States."¹²² According to one newspaper account about the battalion, the officers wanted the battalion to succeed, "with this kind feeling and desire coming from white officers, colored tradesmen have developed an exceptionally high regard for their superior officers, and are ready to perform any task placed before them."¹²³ To get to this moment was incredible not just for the Navy, but for African Americans as well.

¹²⁰ James R. McIntyre, "34th Naval Construction Battalion," 2013, Vol. 2. ABC-CLIO, LLC. <https://discovery-ebsco-com.libproxy.chapman.edu/linkprocessor/plink?id=0fdf7513-34ee-345a-aec1-866cf4ef7e33>.

¹²¹ James R. McIntyre, "34th Naval Construction Battalion."

¹²² Julius L. Hibler, "Seabees get Rating for Special Skills: 34th Naval Construction Battalion is Reviewed by Admiral Combs." *Michigan Chronicle (1939-2010)*, Dec 19, 1942.

<https://login.libproxy.chapman.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.chapman.edu/historical-newspapers/seabees-get-ratings-special-skills/docview/2473785029/se-2>.

¹²³ Hibler, "Seabees get Rating for Special Skills: 34th Naval Construction Battalion is Reviewed by Admiral Combs."

On January 26, 1943, the 34th Seabee battalion was enroute for construction on the Halavo Seaplane Base. At that moment in the war, the U.S. was preparing to launch operation Cactus Ring Lord.¹²⁴ This operation was to secure the jungles of Guadalcanal and other Solomon Islands, specifically Henderson airfield in Guadalcanal. The operation was an air, land, and sea battle; many different branches of the Armed Forces partook in this operation and one of them was the 34th Seabees battalion. The battalion was tasked with building airstrips because the Navy commanders wanted an airfield east of Henderson field for the fighters to take off if Henderson was attacked. The first test of the integrated 34th battalion was working at the airfield, code named Acorn 4 at the island of Tulagi. Acorn was the code name given to new or captured enemy airfields. Acorns received priority due to their tactical importance and the speed at which the Seabees could make them operational. According to the Office of Naval Operations manual for Logistics of Advance Base, “highly mobile Acorns... can be established by surprise tactics between sunset and sunrise on enemy territory... strategically important... offensive instruments possessing tactical surprise to a highly portentous degree.”¹²⁵ In order for the Acorns to be used, the Seabees had to work fast and efficient because without them, the U.S. had a low chance of victory.

The Navy believed that the Seabees could produce an operation runway overnight; four star general, Alexander Vandegrift, agreed that the airstrip was a good idea for Henderson field, but believed Koli Point was a more suitable site for building an airstrip.¹²⁶ However, Vandegrift’s engineer reconnaissance came back with reports of the area being unsuitable for an

¹²⁴ Timothy L. Clubb, *Cactus Air Power at Guadalcanal*, (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 1996), 85.

¹²⁵ *The Logistics of Advance Bases: The Base Maintenance Division OP-30 [OP-415]*, November 7, 2017, 75-79, <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/l/the-logistics-of-advance-bases.html#6>.

¹²⁶ Clubb, *Cactus Air Power at Guadalcanal*, 85.

airfield. General Vandegrift ignored this information and sent the 34th battalion to work on the airfield at Koli Point.¹²⁷ This project was excruciating slow and, just as reported, the swampy area was completely unsuitable for an airfield and surrounded by enemy fire.

While working the African American Seabees were working closely with the Marines. The Marines during this campaign had no known African Americans in their battalion and if the reports are correct, this means that the only African Americans working with the Marines were the ones attached to the 34th battalion. The Marines working with the 34th battalion came to respect these men. Journalist William Bradford Huie, who was recruited to work with the Seabees and follow them on their assignment, recounts his time overseas with the 34th Seabee Battalion, “As soon as the Seabees had watched the Marines clean out a Jap rat nest, and as soon as the Marines had watched the Seabees operate under bombs and shells on Henderson Field, each outfit knew that the other was good enough to play on his team. Seabee battalions became integral parts of Marine combat divisions. Marine combat reporters became the warmest journalist friends of the integrated Seabees.”¹²⁸ It did not matter to the Marines what color the Seabees were, they had enormous respect for what they did under enemy fire. It showed them that African American Seabees are just as capable, brave, and ready to serve their country as white Seabees. Operation Cactus Ring Lord was the first time African American Seabees showed how well they worked with white men and how successful they could be if given the opportunity. Unfortunately, the news of African American Seabees in the 34th battalion working alongside whites on this mission was not highlighted in the media. It was only reported in Navy records of the cruise log books, but it never made it to the public. The news focused on the

¹²⁷ Clubb, *Cactus Air Power at Guadalcanal*, 85.

¹²⁸ Huie, *Can Do!: The Story of the Seabees*, 181.

Marines contribution and completely disregarded the Seabees work, as to why this happened was unclear. The focus remained on the Marines that were working at Guadalcanal.

By May 11, 1943, the 34th battalion was located at Tulagi and had a small detachment in Russell Island. From an April 1943 secret naval report, 260 men were at Guadalcanal since March 26, 1942, and 185 men were sent to Russell on April 21st and 23rd. They were expected to reconstruct the battalion at Florida Island latter in June.¹²⁹ It is unclear as to how many African Americans Seabees were sent where, but it is safe to assume that whites and blacks were posted together based on the number of men who were sent to Guadalcanal and Russell Island. The Navy viewed it as successful because the men got the job done and helped make the base a strategic point to attack the Japanese. The manpower of the 34th battalion was contributing to the success the Navy was having against the Japanese. According to William Bradford Huie, the Marines working with the blacks had this newfound respect for them and trusted them with their lives.¹³⁰ This respect was based on how hard the African American men worked, their skills, and their efficiency under constant bombardments.¹³¹

After a long stint operating in the Solomon Islands, the 34th Seabee battalion was posted at Halavo Seaplane Base, Tulagi, Purvis Bay, and Gavutu Island respectively. The units' big undertaking was at Halavo Seaplane Base. Their mission was to help carve its camp out of the deep jungle. During their time there they experienced two direct enemy bombings and were under almost nightly enemy raids for a period of five months. Two men were killed and twenty-

¹²⁹ 34th Naval Construction Battalion Cruise Log, 2.

¹³⁰ Huie, *Can Do!: The Story of the Seabees*, 181.

¹³¹ Huie, *Can Do!: The Story of the Seabees*, 181.

six wounded as a result.¹³² Despite enemy raids the men pushed on; through all the chaos they endured, all reports showed that the battalion was working well with one another, despite being of different races and backgrounds.¹³³ However, things soon changed for the African American Seabees of the 34th construction battalion.

After serving twenty months in the South Pacific, the 34th battalion was back at Port Hueneme, California in November 1944 and officially done with their first tour during World War II. They gained a lot of respect from the Marines at Henderson field and showed that African Americans are good soliders and are hard workers, but also that whites and blacks could coexist and work together in the military.¹³⁴ This experiment and deployment were a complete success for the Navy; the Navy and some Seabees attached to the battalion saw this as a huge win, but many African American Seabees did not agree.¹³⁵

As the war went on, African Americans served in more prominent combat roles for the U.S. military, but that did not mean they were given the same opportunities as white men serving in the military. Despite how successful the African Americans of the 34th Seabee battalion were in their first overseas tour, they soon realized that they were still struggling to gain equal treatment from their superiors.¹³⁶ The 34th battalion African Americans, decided to take matters into their own hands, peacefully.

¹³² Helen Gahagan Douglas. *The Negro Soldier: A Partial Record of Negro Devotion and Heroism in the Cause of Freedom, Gathered from the Files of the War and Navy Departments.* (Washington D.C.: U.S. G.P.O., 1946), 35-36.

¹³³ Clubb, *Cactus Air Power at Guadalcanal*, 85.

¹³⁴ Huie, *Can Do!: The Story of the Seabees*, 181.

¹³⁵ "WWII Black Seabees."

¹³⁶ "Navy Orders Investigation of W. Coast Hunger Strike." *Philadelphia Tribune (1912-)*, Mar 31, 1945. <https://login.libproxy.chapman.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/navy-orders-investigation-w-coast-hunger-strike/docview/531743216/se-2>.

On Friday, March 2, 1945, over one thousand African American Seabees of the 34th battalion went on a hunger strike to protest racial discrimination in the granting of advanced ratings. The hunger strike lasted two days and stemmed from their charge that their commanding officer J.P. McBean was not treating the men equal and because many of the African American veterans in the battalion were denied for three years the opportunity to advance in ratings.¹³⁷ The colored striking Seabees stated that they had “received unfair and racially discriminatory treatment” from McBean.¹³⁸ While reassembling for their next deployment, African American petty officers were used for unskilled manual labor and never placed in charge of working parties.¹³⁹ Being a petty officer as a black man meant nothing according to the strikers, as they were not able to do the jobs that come with being a petty officer.

Although there was many intelligent, educated, responsible African Americans in the battalion, few to none received promotions, regardless of their long service overseas and their superb work.¹⁴⁰ The lack of promotions for blacks was common in the military, even though they were told by the Bureau of Yards and Docks that they would be treated the same to their fellow white Seabees in regard to promotions and assignments.¹⁴¹ Unfortunately that was not the case for the African Americans of the 34th battalion, “in some unites, Negroes regardless of their competency received no promotion. Many white officers were determined that no Negroes should become petty officers. When colored sailors protested this kind of treatment, they were often severely punished.”¹⁴² The black Seabees’ action, striking, could have resulted in severe

¹³⁷ James, Breitman, Keemer, et. Al, *Fighting Racism in World War II*, 347.

¹³⁸ Byers, *A Study of the Negro in Military Service*, 461.

¹³⁹ Blazich, “Building for a Nation and for Equality.”

¹⁴⁰ “Navy Orders Investigation of W. Coast Hunger Strike.”

¹⁴¹ Byers, *A Study of the Negro in Military Service*, 457.

¹⁴² Byers, *A Study of the Negro in Military Service*, 457.

punishment, but their equality and equal opportunity was clearly more important than any punishment. These men served alongside not only white Seabees, but also white Marines. The Marines were still heavily segregated during this time and if the Marines worked well with the 34th battalion and the African American Seabees, the men felt they should receive more respect from their commanding officer. The striking Seabees knew that when they joined the Seabees there were policies written by Admiral Stark and enforced by the Bureau of Yards and Docks to protect them from the discrimination they were facing, and they had every right to protest for equal promotions and assignments.¹⁴³ These men wanted to be equal and to have an opportunity to grow within the battalion and rise ranks, but this constant wall of discrimination was going to start cracking because of the men of the 34th battalion.

The news of how the African American Seabees in the 34th battalion were treated was revealed in an anonymous interview in the black newspaper, the *Philadelphia Tribune*. In it, the Seabee revealed that his commanding officer J.P. McBean made the statement that “no Negroes on the base are qualified to receive higher ratings or leadership” and he would only promote white men.¹⁴⁴ The Seabee goes on to reiterate that this was one of the main reasons that the 34th Seabee battalion were striking; white Seabees, who had no overseas experience, were given preferred ratings and elevated to chiefs over black Seabees who had both the experience and training.¹⁴⁵ Another reason they went on a hunger strike was because McBean instituted segregated barracks and mess arrangement. These arrangements stateside were despite having blacks and whites in close quarters overseas. Further, under McBean, black petty officers were degraded of their rate and given unskilled labor jobs and denied any opportunity to lead working

¹⁴³ “WWII Black Seabees.”

¹⁴⁴ "Navy Orders Investigation of W. Coast Hunger Strike."

¹⁴⁵ "Navy Orders Investigation of W. Coast Hunger Strike."

parties.¹⁴⁶ African American Seabees refused to report to the chow lines, but continued working, peacefully. After the first day of the hungry strike, the station commander ordered the men to the chow hall, they complied with the orders, but refused to touch the food.¹⁴⁷ They used this strike strategy to make a statement, but in a respectful, peaceful, nonviolent way to reiterate that they wanted to be promoted and rated based on their skills. The strike lasted two days.

Two days were all the men needed before they drew public attention to the injustice they were experiencing. Immediately after the strike, the Navy Department ordered an investigation of the charges made by the men of the 34th Seabee battalion. Commander Quigly, an advance base depot commander, sought to dismiss the men's complaints and claimed that there was "no color line or discrimination against members of the battalion."¹⁴⁸ Several of the alleged leaders of the hunger strike were reported and held on a safeguard charge, a law intended to prevent someone from being harmed, even though public relations officials of the Navy stated that no disciplinary action was contemplated, and that the incident was closed.¹⁴⁹ This did not sit well with many people, public outrage continued and demanded the Navy to do more to address the black Seabee's promises, such as promotions and better assignments that use their skills. This led the Navy's integrity to be challenged and questioned once again as the realities were in contradiction to the Navy's clearly made statements and claims about policies to protect black seamen against discrimination in treatment.

This incident reached both national and global audiences and was broadcasted by radio commentators, investigated by journalists and written about by civil rights activists. Leslie

¹⁴⁶ "WWII Black Seabees."

¹⁴⁷ Dennis D. Nelson, *The Integration of the Negro into the U.S. Navy*, (N.Y.: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1951), 84.

¹⁴⁸ James, Breitman, Keemer, et. Al, *Fighting Racism in World War II*, 347.

¹⁴⁹ James, Breitman, Keemer, et. Al, *Fighting Racism in World War II*, 347.

Perry, head of the Washington branch of the NAACP wrote letters to the Secretary of the Navy Forrestal, to the House Naval Affairs Committee, and to Rear Admiral W.L. Friedell, U.S.N.R., commandant of the 11th Naval District in which he stated, “That hunger Strike brought to a head the trouble that had been brewing for a long time, for which there appears to be no solution except to remove the officer in charge, Commander McBean, who apparently doesn’t seem to be able to forget that he is from Mississippi.”¹⁵⁰ In other words, it was assumed that Southern white men were the only ones able to successfully command black troops because of “their ability and knowledge in handling African Americans,” and having Southern white men command black troops would ensure no racial problems because it maintained the status quo. However, putting Southern white officers in charge created more problems and actually made it impossible for these units to be efficient and focus on their jobs. Many Southern white men still had the World War I Jim Crow ideology of blacks not being able to prove their Americanism, patriotism, and the proof that African Americans could contribute to the protection and advancement of the country, and it showed through their leadership of African Americans. This caused questions from African American who reiterated the questions James G. Thompson made famous in his editorial in the *Pittsburgh Courier* which stated Double-V campaign, some of these questions included, “Should I sacrifice my life to live half American,” “Will things be better for the next generation in the pace to follow”.¹⁵¹ It also caused many African Americans to be extremely skeptical about the “war for democracy” in which their men were asked to fight and die for are

¹⁵⁰ "Navy Orders Investigation of W. Coast Hunger Strike."

¹⁵¹ James G. Thompson, “Should I Sacrifice To Live Half-American.” *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 31, 1942, file:///C:/Users/17142/AppData/Local/Packages/microsoft.windowscommunicationsapps_8wekyb3d8bbwe/LocalState/Files/S0/3/Attachments/Pittburgh%20Courier_Should_I_Sacrifice_To_Live_Half_American%20James%20G%20Thompson [1268].pdf.

still in Jim Crowed military forces regardless of all the policy that were put into place to protect them.¹⁵²

The Navy in 1944 was not the same Navy as the one in 1940. In four short years, the Navy had made progress with change in leadership, inclusion and equality of African Americans in World War II. With the sudden death of Secretary of the Navy Knox, brought a new Secretary of the Navy, James Forrestal, in May of 1944. Forrestal had more of a liberal take on how African Americans should be treated. The new Secretary of the Navy, Forrestal, differed from Secretary of the Navy Knox. Forrestal had a close relationship with President Roosevelt; Forrestal was one of President Roosevelt's advisers before he became the Secretary of the Navy and his duties included working as a liaison officer between the president, the Treasury Department and other governmental financial agencies. Just like Roosevelt, Forrestal believed African Americans should be treated equal and believed changes needed to be made in order for the Navy to be a more coherent branch.¹⁵³ The Navy meant everything and he wanted the Navy to have success in the war, meaning he wanted them to win then remainder of the battles and end the war.¹⁵⁴ With the striking 34th receiving negative feedback towards the Navy, the Navy knew they had to handle the situation with ease and grace, just like Forrestal wanted. African Americans attached to the outfit declared that four things must be done to alter the situation within the unit: "a new commanding officer should be assigned immediately. He should be a man without the race traditions of the South," "the assignment of northern white officers and Negro officers to the outfit," "all Negro enlisted personnel including chief petty officers," "the

¹⁵² James, Breitman, Keemer, et. Al, *Fighting Racism in World War II*, 348.

¹⁵³ Geoffrey Ward, "The Self-made Man," *American Heritage*, September 15, 1992.
<https://www.americanheritage.com/self-made-man>.

¹⁵⁴ Ward, "The Self-made Man."

assignment of Negro chaplains rather than white chaplains to the unit.”¹⁵⁵ What would help with the discrimination problem was to get commanding officer, executive officers, and others who had, in their estimation, less of a racial bias to lead the 34th battalion. This is exactly what happened. The Bureau of Yards and Docks launched an investigation into the battalion’s command. The Bureau determined that “although there may be some degree of natural segregation in a mixed group, under no circumstance should there be segregation or discrimination forced by reason of quartering, messing, and assignment of duty.”¹⁵⁶ Following their investigation, the commanding officer, executive officer, and roughly 20% of the remaining officers and petty officers were relieved of their duties.¹⁵⁷ The Bureau understood, on some level, that removing these men, would provide better promotional opportunities for qualified African American members of the unit and it would help the Navy restore its reputation on being a united and strong fleet.¹⁵⁸ However, as an institute, the Navy never made a policy change with regards to the use of Southern officers commanding black troops. The change in Southern officers was true for the 34th Seabee Battalion and the 80th Seabee Battalion, as the following pages will show. Although the Navy started taking steps towards integration and desegregation, the Navy still had a ways to go in this long and somewhat on-going process.

¹⁵⁵ "Navy Seamen Voice Protest." *New Journal and Guide* (1916-), Jan 13, 1945. <https://login.libproxy.chapman.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/navy-seamen-voice-protest/docview/567866512/se-2>.

¹⁵⁶ An insert from Chief of Naval Personnel letter (1945) speaking of the conditions at Camp Rousseau, Port Hueneme, California. Amber Delacruz, “Breaking Down Barriers: The 34th Naval Construction Battalion,” U.S. Navy Seabee Museum, <https://seabeesmuseum.wordpress.com/2018/02/07/breaking-down-barriers-the-34th-naval-construction-battalion/>.

¹⁵⁷ "Navy Removes McBean from Seabee Command." *Atlanta Daily World* (1932-), Apr 27, 1945. <https://login.libproxy.chapman.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.chapman.edu/historical-newspapers/navy-removes-mcbean-seabee-command/docview/490762895/se-2>.

¹⁵⁸ "Navy Removes McBean from Seabee Command."

In a letter to the NY NAACP headquarters, Rear Admiral William M. Fechteler, assistant Chief of Naval Personnel, wrote, “you are advised that representatives of the navy department made a thorough investigation of the conditions in the 34th Naval Construction battalion and corrective action have been taken in accordance with their recommendations. No further changes are considered necessary at this time.”¹⁵⁹ The fact that the Navy acknowledge there was discrimination going on in the battalion showed a distinct shift in how the Navy operated in the early years of the war.

However, it was not just the officers the black Seabees blamed for discrimination. They also held, “the white enlisted personnel in our battalion is responsible for all the segregation and discrimination. They get all the promotions, which keeps Negro enlisted men from being advanced in rating. Not a single Negro has been made a chief petty officer.”¹⁶⁰ The African American men attached to this battalion were tired of the mishandling of promotions and were done sitting back and watching unqualified white men get promoted not for their skills and capability, but rather the color of their skin. There are no records indicating that the white enlisted Seabees did anything to change the wrongful promotions or participate in the strike. The black Seabees fought for their voices to be heard and demanded change and because of them fighting back, they were able to change how they were treated. Because of their bravery for speaking out about the injustices they were facing, the Navy decided to act on it and made changes in the 34th battalion and while doing so, they unknowingly began the process of changing how the Navy managed black units.

¹⁵⁹ "Navy Removes McBean from Seabee Command."

¹⁶⁰ "Navy Seamen Voice Protest."

This was one of the first time the Navy acknowledge and corrected anything that involved racism in the Seabees. The Chief of the Bureau of Naval Personnel stated, “if the present commanding officers persists in his policy regarding the non-rating of Negro chief petty officers, the filling of all vacancies in the grade of petty officers first class will cause virtual stagnation in the advancement of negro petty officers of a lower rating and will have the effect of suppressing all ambition within the Negro personnel.”¹⁶¹ For the Navy it was not always about writing a wrong for the blacks, it was about increasing manpower and increasing efficiency, but the 34th battalion made them not only look at manpower and efficiency, but, look at how the Navy managed black units and how could they make these units more efficient so they can produce more manpower for the war. This meant that without African Americans officers, the Seabees would have a harder time recruiting skilled blacks for the battalion, meaning a decrease in manpower. Having blacks advance to officers would improve the recruitment of other African Americans, the need to address the inequalities the African American Seabees of the 34th battalion, outweighed the Navy position of keeping quiet and continuing the cycle of discrimination. African American Seabees of the 34th battalion fought for their equality in promotions and assignment by participating in a peaceful hunger strike that led to the removal of racist white-southern officers; this removal allowed African Americans in the 34th battalion to have an equal chance to be promoted or have an assignment that could lead to a potential promotion.

¹⁶¹ An insert from Naval Inspector General letter (1945), conditions at Camp Rousseau, Port Hueneme, California, Delacruz, “Breaking Down Barriers: The 34th Naval Construction Battalion.”

The 80th Naval Construction Battalion

The African American men in the 80th Seabee battalion were just as eager to start their training as the men of the 34th.¹⁶² The 80th battalion was the second integrated Seabee battalion the Navy commissioned during World War II. They were organized in much of the same way as the 34th Seabee Battalion, they were led by white-southern officers, composed of mostly black men, and had no black officers. In late December 1943, several hundred African American men arrived at Camp Allen, Norfolk, Virginia, to begin their training for the Seabees. This was a unit of 1015 men which consisted of 27 officers, 64 chief petty officers, 150 petty officers, first class and 17 petty officers, second class. There were 744 Negroes, a few of whom were rated, three Chinese and ten Filipinos.¹⁶³ The men ranged in age and experience and were from different states, but Texas was the most represented with 92 seamen coming from Houston and 40 from Dallas; Louisiana, Arkansas, Mississippi, and New York were the next strongly represented states in that order.¹⁶⁴ There was many men coming from the South, where racial discrimination was prominent part of everyday life. The men of the battalion were not notified that it would be an integrated battalion until they were at camp. This may have caught many of them off guard, but they continued getting ready for their deployment.¹⁶⁵ At camp the men were “learning close-order and extended drill, rifle and bayonet tactics, hand grenade throwing, and other fundamental military and naval arts.”¹⁶⁶ The battalion moved to advance Base Depot Gulfport, Mississippi

¹⁶² "80th Battalion of Seabees is Eager to do Bit for Victory." 1943.*New Journal and Guide (1916-)*, Feb 27, 1. <https://login.libproxy.chapman.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.chapman.edu/historical-newspapers/80th-battalion-seabees-is-eager-to-bit-victory/docview/567741942/se-2>.

¹⁶³ Prepared by the Historical Section Bureau of Naval Personnel. *The Negro in the Navy: United States Naval Administrative History of World War II #84-1947*, 77. <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/n/negro-navy-1947-adminhist84.html>.

¹⁶⁴ "80th Battalion of Seabees is Eager to do Bit for Victory."

¹⁶⁵ "80th Battalion of Seabees is Eager to do Bit for Victory."

¹⁶⁶ "80th Battalion of Seabees is Eager to do Bit for Victory."

after their training. At Gulfport, friction between the African American men and the white petty officers mounted, “there is evidence suggesting that the latter were not well chosen or properly indoctrinated in their job,” according to the Bureau of Naval Personnel.¹⁶⁷ The African American men assigned to the battalion were disappointed after learning the Executive Officer, whom the colored men claimed to have regarded as their chief reliance for skillful handling of the racial situation, was going to be detached from their battalion.¹⁶⁸ They thought that the men they were working with at the camp that helped them deal with any racial situation they were facing were going to be assigned to their battalion when they left for assignment, but were disappointed when they found out there was going to be no one assigned to the battalion to help them solve any complaint about race.¹⁶⁹

The 80th battalion departed for their first deployment and arrived in Trinidad on August 3, 1943. The 80th Seabees Battalion was deployed to the Caribbean because the Navy was launching Operation Lighter-Than-Air and the 80th was charged with building a station at Carlsen Field. They built a large steel blimp hangar, a mooring circle, paved runways, a helium-purification plant, and other operation appurtenances.¹⁷⁰ During World War II, the Navy used the blimps that were heading to England and the Soviet Union to fly alongside the convoys to protect the armadas from German U-boats, this was known as Operation Lighter-Than-Air. These blimps, known as barrage balloons, could be tied by cables to ships during invasions to prevent German air attacks. The successful completion of Carlsen Field was a must to keep the U.S. fleets safe from Germans. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, Admiral Moreell, and other dignitaries

¹⁶⁷ *The Negro in the Navy: United States Naval Administrative History of World War II #84-1947*, 78.

¹⁶⁸ *The Negro in the Navy: United States Naval Administrative History of World War II #84-1947*, 78.

¹⁶⁹ *The Negro in the Navy: United States Naval Administrative History of World War II #84-1947*, 78.

¹⁷⁰ "Building The Navy's Bases in World War II", 30.

visited the unit to inspect their progress.¹⁷¹ This was important because dignitaries held a high status and for them to be visiting the 80th battalion, which had many African Americans in the battalion, showed the importance the 80th battalion had in the war.

The men of the 80th battalion brilliant skills and successful building of a large steel blimp hangar, a mooring circle, paved runways, a helium-purification plant at Carlsen Field was not, however, what the 80th Seabee Battalion were going to be known for. Shortly after their deployment in Trinidad, the 80th Seabees Battalion caught the attention of Black media outlets through a letter written by an African American Seabee of the 80th battalion on September 1943. In it, the anonymous Seabees detailed several ways in that the black men in the 80th battalion were being treated unjustly. The letter explained that unequal promotion opportunities, constant racial slurs and aggression, and the failure of leadership to listen to the grievances of the African American affected the men in the battalion.¹⁷² The 80th and 34th Seabee Battalions both dealt with discrimination; however, both handled the situation differently at first. Both battalions used different ways to push back against discrimination and unfair treatment, one used a hunger strike and the other wrote letters to express their treatment in promotion and assignments and later they staged a protest because the Navy was not listening to what they had to say in the letters. Black Seabees were trying ever outlet to get the Navy to listen to them and make changes that would help blacks gain equality, but the Navy continued to neglect black's equality, and both battalions were going to do whatever it took until the Navy decided to act and help them.

¹⁷¹ Blazich, "Building for a Nation and for Equality."

¹⁷² "WWII Black Seabees."

In transit back to Port Hueneme, a reported 744 African Americans of the 80th battalion staged a protest over their disagreements with segregation in the Caribbean.¹⁷³ In the Caribbean there was a handful of discipline based on color, the degree of their discipline depended on their skin type. This meant that if there was a white seaman who did something they should not have, they would not receive a harsh punishment, but if a black seamen did the same thing the white seamen did, he would receive a harsher punishment. In transit from Trinidad, tensions between the two group of men grew. There was evidence of “issues made over points small enough in themselves so that the tension caused reflects a very poor state of moral and understanding.”¹⁷⁴ One of these smaller incidents included an African Americans man who denied access to the petty officer’s quarters on the transport because his rating was in the Steward’s Branch. While seemingly a small matter, this contributed to the frustration many African Americans in the battalion were feeling.¹⁷⁵ What really angered the men, was the way they were being treated by their commanding officers.

In Trinidad, African Americans had “separate beer sales windows were opened for the races at the ship's store; according to the battalion commander this was done as a "favor" to the Negroes to speed up sales, and the differentiation was withdrawn when a protest was made.”¹⁷⁶ African American men claimed discriminations in promotions, while the Commanding Officer denied this. They also complained of the discriminatory limitations on liberty, a “free pass” from working that day, which the Commanding Officer justified because of the excessively high venereal disease rate.¹⁷⁷ The Commanding Officers knew of the mistreatment the African

¹⁷³ Davis, ““Many of them are among my best men,” 82.

¹⁷⁴ *The Negro in the Navy: United States Naval Administrative History of World War II #84-1947*, 78.

¹⁷⁵ *The Negro in the Navy: United States Naval Administrative History of World War II #84-1947*, 78.

¹⁷⁶ *The Negro in the Navy: United States Naval Administrative History of World War II #84-1947*, 78.

¹⁷⁷ *The Negro in the Navy: United States Naval Administrative History of World War II #84-1947*, 78.

American men were going through and chose to do nothing about it.¹⁷⁸ African American men were fed up with the constant discrimination they were facing and a letter about their experience made its way to the press, the world was about to know what was happening in the 80th Seabees Battalion.

The complaints from the letter angered the Navy, so much so, that it led to dishonorable discharge for 19 of the African Americans attached to the 80th Seabee Battalion. The letter angered the Navy because they believed that the African American Seabees in the 80th battalion were lying about the mistreatment because the commanding officers in the battalion expressed to the Navy that the mistreatment was not true.¹⁷⁹ They were discharged as “undesirable by reason of unfitness or because of inaptitude.”¹⁸⁰ This meant that these men were discharged because they were not well suited for the job or lacked the skills to be in the Seabees. However, this was far from the truth. The reason these men were discharged is because they voiced their concerns over the inequality they were facing in the battalion.

Before the discharges, in September 1943, 12 members of the battalion were urged to express their complaints concerning race conditions in the battalion to their commanding officers, who was a white-southern man. According to these men, they were “encouraged to talk straight from the shoulder in the presence of their commanding officer and were told the meeting was off the record.”¹⁸¹ The 12 men of the 80th battalion felt like they could speak the truth and were optimistic that real progress would be made from this meeting; however, that was not true. In the meeting, the men did not hesitate to state their opinions on the conditions they believed

¹⁷⁸ *The Negro in the Navy: United States Naval Administrative History of World War II #84-1947*, 78.

¹⁷⁹ Nelson, *The Integration of the Negro into the U.S. Navy*, 85.

¹⁸⁰ Nelson, *The Integration of the Negro into the U.S. Navy*, 85.

¹⁸¹ Nelson, *The Integration of the Negro into the U.S. Navy*, 86.

were discriminatory, particularly when it came to the battalion's promotion policy.¹⁸² Just like in the 34th Seabee Battalion, members of the 80th pointed out that they were not being promoted, whereas unqualified men were receiving promotions left and right. The 80th Seabees Battalion was 80 percent black and 20 percent white but, no African American was rated above petty officer, whereas the white personnel were without exception rated higher in rank.¹⁸³ The black Seabees were promised that officers would "treat all personnel without difference in regard to promotions and assignments."¹⁸⁴ In their minds, the denial of promotions was not considered to be equality and, in this meeting, that is what they voiced to their commanding officer.

After airing out their grievances, the commanding officer promised further meetings on the race conditions in the battalion and that there would be a formation of a committee on race matters that the chaplain would organize. However, on the following day, the commanding officer called all 12 men plus 7 additional men and announced that there would be no more meetings regarding the race conditions in the battalion.¹⁸⁵ A few days later all 19 were discharged, having been accused of being the "ring leaders" for the protests in Trinidad. Sixteen of the men were discharged as "undesirables" and three for "unfitness and inaptitude." The commanding officer of the Naval Operating Base, Trinidad and commandant of the Tenth Naval District approved of the discharges.¹⁸⁶ The commanding officer tried his best to keep the discharge quiet in fear that there would be a public outcry over the discharges. But as was the case with the striking men of the 34th, 19 discharged members of the 80th refused to keep quiet about the injustice discharges. The discharged men were told the meeting was off the record and

¹⁸² Nelson, *The Integration of the Negro into the U.S. Navy*, 86.

¹⁸³ Nelson, *The Integration of the Negro into the U.S. Navy*, 86.

¹⁸⁴ Blazich, "Building for a Nation and for Equality."

¹⁸⁵ Nelson, *The Integration of the Negro into the U.S. Navy*, 86.

¹⁸⁶ Blazich, "Building for a Nation and for Equality."

what was said would not result in any consequences, but the commanding officer lied to them. This incident reveals that the integrated nature of the Seabee units showed no mercy towards African Americans. The commanding officers did not want to hear any complaints about inequality from the black Seabees and the commanding officers would do anything to make sure African Americans' complaints were not out in the public. Despite the efforts to silence black Seabees, the black Seabees continued to protest and fight for equality. The discharged men of the 80th Seabee Battalion contacted NAACP and the African American media to explain what happened. After learning about the discharges, the NAACP appealed to Secretary of the Navy Knox to upgrade the discharges of the 19 men, meaning change the discharges to honorable discharges.¹⁸⁷ The appeal was taken to Secretary Knox, who decided that there were no grounds for relief.¹⁸⁸ The efforts and fight continued by the NAACP and the civilians who supported the discharged men, because they believed these men did nothing wrong when speaking to their commanding officer about their grievances.

It was not until June 22, 1944, that the 19 discharged men decided to take legal action. On June 22, 1944, President Roosevelt signed the Servicemen Readjustment Act of 1944, also known as the G.I. Bill of Rights. The G.I. Bill of Rights aided veterans returning to civilian life after military service during World War II. A provision in the bill stated that persons discharged from the armed forces could have their discharges examined by a review board.¹⁸⁹ Under the legal guidance of the NAACP and their special counsel, civil rights lawyer Thurgood Marshall, the men requested their discharges to be reviewed by a military reviewing board. While the

¹⁸⁷ "WWII Black Seabees."

¹⁸⁸ Nelson, *The Integration of the Negro into the U.S. Navy*, 87.

¹⁸⁹ "Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944," National Archives, <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/servicemens-readjustment-act>.

review board examined the discharges, the remaining members of the 80th Seabee Battalion returned from their development in Trinidad and arrived in Port Hueneme, California in July 1944. At Port Hueneme, the African Americans in the battalion were interviewed by and confirmed that the discharged men were speaking the truth and explained what happened in the battalion when they were at Trinidad. This prompted a Navy investigation into the battalion's leadership which found that leadership problems were a major factor in Caribbean incidents.¹⁹⁰ Upon arrival and order of the Bureau of Yards and Docks, the commanding officers, and chiefs of the 80th Naval Construction Battalion were relieved of their duties. The Bureau of Yards and Docks then made a "conscientious decision to restaff the positions with officers from northern states as opposed to the previously southern officers."¹⁹¹ Just like in the 34th Seabee Battalion, the southern commanding officers were replaced by northern officers. One Civil Engineer Corps officer noted that during the war, choosing officers for a Seabee unit, "a man may be from the north, south, east, or west. If his attitude is to do the best possible job he knows how, regardless of what the color of his personnel is, that is the man we want as an officer for our colored Seabees."¹⁹² Yet, many African American Seabees believed that the northern officers were less racist, and many African American men preferred northern state officers.¹⁹³ They wanted officers who would do their best for the African Americans as well for the whole battalion. The African American Seabees of the 80th Battalion protest and testimony pointed to the poor leadership in the 80th Battalion and showed, once again, that white-southern officers should not oversee African American because of a legacy of historical racial bias.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹⁰ "WWII Black Seabees."

¹⁹¹ "WWII Black Seabees."

¹⁹² Blazich, "Building for a Nation and for Equality."

¹⁹³ Blazich, "Building for a Nation and for Equality."

¹⁹⁴ Nelson, *The Integration of the Negro into the U.S. Navy*, 87.

On April 4, 1945, the review board reached a verdict on the discharged men. The Navy reported that the discharges of 14 African American Seabees for unfitness or inaptitude had been changed to discharges under honorable conditions.¹⁹⁵ The changes were ordered by a Navy Board of Review and approved by the Secretary of the Navy. As for the other five discharged men, one of the African American men who was discharged for “undesirable” was left unchanged because “the Navy said he had committed several infractions of naval rules and discipline before discharge.”¹⁹⁶ His name was never revealed to the public. The remaining four members cases were not considered.¹⁹⁷ Although, this was a small victory, it was captured in newspapers across the nation. In an article by New York Times, it stated that “at a hearing last December a Navy attorney said that records of the men, as a group, showed they had attended ‘seditious’ meetings, refused to obey orders, attempted sit-down strikes or ‘threatened sabotage.’ He added, however, that all allegations did not apply to each man individually.”¹⁹⁸ The article continued, “attorneys for the Seabees, on other hand, argued that the men were dismissed because they were among the better-educated Negroes in the battalion.”¹⁹⁹ The black community cared deeply about the outcome of Review Board’s decision because it showed that the Navy was finally taking responsibility for the unjust treatment of the black Seabees and it showed the shift that the Navy was taking discrimination problems more serious. This was a moment where

¹⁹⁵ "Navy Orders Changes in 14 C-B Discharges." *The Christian Science Monitor* (1908-), Apr 04, 1945. <https://login.libproxy.chapman.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/navy-orders-changes-14-c-b-discharges/docview/514537507/se-2>.

¹⁹⁶ "Navy Orders Changes in 14 C-B Discharges."

¹⁹⁷ "Navy Orders Changes in 14 C-B Discharges."

¹⁹⁸ "NAVY CHANGES DISCHARGES: REMOVES STIGMA IN CASE OF 14 NEGRO SEABEES." *New York Times* (1923-), Apr 03, 1945. <https://login.libproxy.chapman.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/navy-changes-discharges/docview/107200760/se-2>.

¹⁹⁹ "NAVY CHANGES DISCHARGES: REMOVES STIGMA IN CASE OF 14 NEGRO SEABEES."

the Navy could fix their mistake and show that they were not racist white men. This is exactly what the Navy did, they admitted they were wrong and corrected it.

The Navy's experiment of integrating in the Seabees was a success. Both the 34th and 80th Seabee Battalions showed that black and white men could work side by side and work efficiently, but the battalions still saw ongoing and obvious racial tensions while working alongside whites. The U.S. Navy at the start of World War II was not the same Navy in 1945. It started to recognize the inequalities African American Seamen were facing and realized how important it is to have African Americans in the Navy. It was important to have African Americans in the Navy because they provided manpower when the Navy was depleted from the attacks on Pearl Harbor and other Pacific locations and because the Navy realized the importance of African Americans' participation, they started listening to the needs of African Americans in the 34th and 80th Naval Construction Battalions. The African Americans in both battalions spoke out and fought for their equality, and in doing so, the Navy were forced to understand and react to these battalions in order to deliver their promise of 1942, treat all equal regardless of the color of their skin, but also secure the success of African Americans in the Navy for their use of manpower. The 34th and 80th African American Seabees led the charge in the Navy taking the necessary steps towards African American equality in World War II. This was done by fighting for their equality, demonstrated by peaceful hunger strike and a healthy dose of legal knowhow, eventually leading to the removal of racist white-southern officers that would help pave the way for equality in the Seabees as well as in the Navy, and securing the much-needed manpower for the war.

Conclusion

The Navy was not always inclusive to African Americans, but through an investigation into the Naval Construction Battalions, Seabees, we see the evolution of African Americans work in the Navy. For years, the Navy, wanted to keep black men from doing more than menial jobs and wanted them separate from whites, but as the war progressed the Navy made huge progress in allowing blacks in the Navy. The need for manpower is what pushed the Navy to allow African Americans to have more of a role in the Navy, allowed to take arms, work in the Coast Guard and the Seabees, and were able to work with white seamen.

The thought of having blacks and white in the same battalion during World War II was ridiculous, however, it happened and the outcome of it helped move the Navy towards the path of integration. The Seabees were the first unit in the Navy during the Second World War to have integrated battalions that eventually helped change how the Navy's dealt with African American's equality by the end of the war. The Bureau of Yards and Docks could have easily disbanded the 34th and 80th Seabee Battalion and declare African Americans unsuited for the Seabees, but instead they chose to recognize their errors in how they operated and changed their policies to include and promote equality for African Americans. The work the African American Seabees units did prove equal to that of the white units. The men of these battalions worked under raining bullets, constant aerial bombardment, and under a Jim Crow Navy, yet they still rose to the occasion and worked just as hard as the white men and fought even harder to gain the equality that they were promised when enlisting. In the remarks of Honorable Helen Gahagan Douglas of California during a meeting in the House of Representatives on February 1, 1946, she states that, "one of the important contributions of Negroes to the Navy in the war was that of the

Seabees.”²⁰⁰ These were the men who showed the Navy that African Americans could work with whites and that integration of battalions was not a bad thing, but rather a more efficient way of achieving success and they also taught the Navy that white-southern men were not always the best fit for units that had African American personnel in it.

While examining the two experimental battalions, the 34th and 80th, one can see how they helped break the racial discrimination in the Navy. Because of these two battalions and other African American Seabees speaking out about their inequalities, African American Seabees in World War II became the driving force behind the Navy making better policies regarding equal pay, assignments, opportunity, and leadership. This policy change helped pave the way for equality in the Seabees, as well as in the Navy, which resulted in the Navy becoming a more progressive branch, regarding pay, assignments, opportunity, leadership, and equality in the Armed Forces after World War II.

These two integrated battalions also showed how well whites and blacks could work together and how much they could complete together rather than separate. Many of these men were able to work hand in hand with white soldiers and there were no problems reported. However, these two battalions also faced many challenges regarding equality in their battalions. African American Seabees not in these two integrated units also showed the racial inequalities blacks still faced despite policies instituted to eliminate or lessen discrimination. By experimenting and allowing blacks into the Seabees and allowing two integrated Seabees Battalions to serve during the war, African American Seabees showed how important it was to include blacks in roles that consisted of more than messmen. The African American Seabees

²⁰⁰ Douglas. *The Negro Soldier: A Partial Record of Negro Devotion and Heroism in the Cause of Freedom, Gathered from the Files of the War and Navy Departments*, 35.

fight for equality was tough, but through their actions, they helped remove racist white-southern officers which helped pave the way for equality in the Seabees as well as in the Navy during World War II. This fight was remembered at a veteran's reunion dinner in 1957 at the Reunion Association at Scott's Hotel. At this dinner, Seabees reminisced about the African Americans in the 80th Seabee battalion and their fight for equality. African American Seabees' stories continued to inspire the men at the reunion.²⁰¹ While African Americans Seabees were not the only factor that led to the change in the Navy, they highlighted the changes the Navy took during a time when there were civil rights movements spreading throughout the nation.

The Navy was not the only branch during World War II to progress the treatment of African Americans and give them a chance for equality and different opportunities in the military. In April 1943, the Tuskegee trained the 99th Pursuit Squadron which would be the first African Americans flying squadron to see combat in World War II for the U.S. Army Air Force. The Tuskegee airmen would go on to have an excellent combat record while protecting American bombers from enemy fighters. They would go on to be awarded three Distinguished Unit Citations. Although these men showed how successful and reliant, they could be for the U.S. Army Air Force, they were still subjected to discrimination both within and outside of the Army.

While the military was still racially segregated in 1943, African Americans were still able to show their strength in the Army. In the late 1944, the 761st Tank Battalion, better known as the "Black Panthers" were the first African Americans tanker unit to see combat in Europe. General

²⁰¹ Haynes, Samuel, "How Seabees Helped Win War Though Segregated, Told at Reunion Dinner." *Afro-American* (1893-), Sep 21, 1957. <https://login.libproxy.chapman.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.chapman.edu/historical-newspapers/howseabees-helped-win-war-though-segregated-told/docview/531915638/se-2>.

George Patton told these men, “Everyone has their eyes on you and is expecting great things from you. Most of all your race is looking forward to your success. Don’t let them down.”²⁰²

Many African Americans around the U.S. were following African Americans journey and stories in the military through newspapers and letters and wanted them to succeed. This was because if they could succeed in the military then it felt like a win for African Americans at home.

Although many African Americans in the military were seeing great success and progress, in regards to being included in combat roles, many branches maintained racially segregated. In the Navy, the Seabees were the only place where they experimented with two integrated battalions, because of that, African American men in these battalions not only showed success in combat zones, but also showed success in pushing the Navy to take the appropriated steps forward for integration, better pay, more opportunities, overall equality as a person, and promotions. The African American Seabees are part of the civil rights fight in World War II, and because of their contributions the Navy started to recognize that black sailors are just as capable of winning a war than white sailors are.

Civil rights movements did not only happen overseas but also when African Americans were coming home from the war. As troops returned home from the frontlines in 1944, 1945, and 1946, many African Americans were confronted with pre-existing racial lines that plagued their time in the military.²⁰³ Many African Americans were expecting to have some changes occur, in regard to equality, upon arriving from their time overseas, but that was not the reality for many African Americans. In one instance a Tuskegee Airman returned home only to hear a white sailor

²⁰² "African Americans in World War II," The National WWII Museum New Orleans, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/topics/african-americans-world-war-ii>.

²⁰³ Thomas A. Guglielmo, *Divisions: A New History of Racism and Resistance in America's World War II Military*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 370.

make orders stating, “blacks over here, whites over here.”²⁰⁴ This was one African American’s experience, this incident of racism was not true for every African American returning from war.

Another black veteran recalled his return as marvelous because he saw white and black soldiers show camaraderie on the ship back to the Pacific and believed he was returning to an United States than can have a democratic Army.²⁰⁵ He believed America has changed since his time overseas and believed this camaraderie would continue.²⁰⁶ Many returning African Americans believed things have changed for the better when it came to equality, based on what they saw when returning home from war.²⁰⁷

There are varying experiences of African Americans returning from war. However, these experiences were similar in revealing how surprised they all were when they returned home. It shows how each African American viewed the progress the Armed Forces made with equality. Some believed it made more progress and in-return believed they would be treated fairly when returning home, but that was not the reality. While others believed the progress the military made was nonexistence but was surprised with the support and fairness they were receiving when they returned home.

As the war came to its closing years, African Americans continued to show how successful they could be for the U.S. military. The U.S. awarded some black GIs and units awards such as the Distinguished Service Crosses and Silver Stars, but out of 420 or so Medal of

²⁰⁴ Guglielmo, *Divisions: A New History of Racism and Resistance in America’s World War II Military*, 370.

²⁰⁵ Guglielmo, *Divisions: A New History of Racism and Resistance in America’s World War II Military*, 370.

²⁰⁶ Guglielmo, *Divisions: A New History of Racism and Resistance in America’s World War II Military*, 370.

²⁰⁷ Guglielmo, *Divisions: A New History of Racism and Resistance in America’s World War II Military*, 370.

Honors handed out during World War II, not even one went to an African American.²⁰⁸ Black sailors, such as Dorie Miller, showed that they distinguished themselves by acts of valor. The United States Armed Forces still did not recognize African American's contribution or bravery during World War II. This frustrated many African Americans. The lack of the Medal of Honor to well deserving African Americans during World War II was frustrating to many African Americans because it seemed like all their work, bravery, and sacrifice was for nothing. The African American Seabees helped the Navy make progressive steps towards equality in pay, promotions, and assignments, but it would take the Armed Forces, themselves, to make progress in equality for all African Americans that served in the U.S. Military.

The military was not perfect when it came to black equality, but regardless, it made some progress whether it be small or large, but at the end of the day, if African Americans were not treated equal and did not have basic civil rights in the U.S., then the progress the military made only mattered if African Americans were still in the military. After the war, the fight for civil rights had to now be fought in the United States and not only in the military.

The story of the African American Seabees is an important piece of World War II history as well as U.S. history. African American Seabees constantly faced injustice by the Navy, and once these men started to expose the Navy's actions, the citizens back home started demanding that the African American Seabees be treated equally. Because of the African American Seabees exposing the Navy and the citizens' support for the men, then and only then, did they start to be treated equal. Since they fought for their equality and gained the attention back in the U.S., the Navy wanted to avoid being in public eye for discrimination again and did not want to be seem

²⁰⁸ Guglielmo, *Divisions: A New History of Racism and Resistance in America's World War II Military*, 375.

vulnerable to another attack, like during Pearl Harbor, they decided to act quick and try to fix the inequality these men were facing. The Navy started the war with being a least progressive branch for African American to becoming a more progressive branch, regarding leadership, pay, assignments, opportunity, and equality because the African American Seabees showed how efficient they could work with white Seabees and showed the Navy the type of manpower they could bring in winning the war.

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