

# Racism against African Americans in the U.S. military

---

African Americans have served the U.S. military in every war the U.S has fought.<sup>[1]</sup> Formalized **discrimination against black people who have served in the U.S. military** lasted from its creation during the Revolutionary War to the end of segregation by President Harry S. Truman's Executive Order 9981 in 1948.<sup>[1]</sup> Although desegregation within the U.S. military was legally established with President Truman's executive order, full integration of African-American servicemen was not established until 1950 for the U.S Navy and U.S. Air Force and not until 1953 for the U.S Army.<sup>[1]</sup>



An African-American military policeman on a motorcycle in front of the "colored" MP entrance, Columbus, Georgia, in 1942.

## Contents

---

**Revolutionary War**

**War of 1812**

**Civil War**

**Philippine-American War**

**World War I**

**Interwar period**

**World War II**

**See also**

**References**

**External links**

## Revolutionary War

---

African-Americans served on both sides of the war in the capacity of both fighting men and slaves. While the northern states had opened up their state militias to freed slaves, it was forbidden in the south to arm slaves as the southern planters feared the worst from their former slaves. The Royal Governor of Virginia, John Murray, 4th Earl of Dunmore, issued an emancipation proclamation in November 1775, promising freedom to runaway slaves who fought for the British. Sir Henry Clinton, Commander in Chief of British forces, issued a similar edict in New York in 1779. Over 100,000 slaves escaped to the British lines; most served as laborers or orderlies for the British. The former slaves were promised freedom, and eventually ended up free in Canada due to the British losing the Revolutionary War.

In response, George Washington lifted the ban on black enlistment in the Continental Army in January 1776. All-black units were formed in Rhode Island and Massachusetts and many of those enrolled were slaves promised freedom for serving. At least 5,000 African-American soldiers fought as revolutionaries, while at least 20,000 served with the British.

## War of 1812

---

While whites still did not particularly like the idea of arming blacks during the war, many of the sailors in the U.S. Navy were black. In fact, during the Battle of Lake Erie African-Americans made up about one-quarter of the personnel in the American naval squadrons. While they served faithfully in the Navy, they were not allowed to serve in the Army. However naval service was often unpopular and to get sufficient seamen on occasion various shipyard commandants employed slaves as seamen. In his 12 July 1809 letter to the Secretary of the Navy, Commodore Thomas Tingey confirms this practice. Tingey had requested permission to employ up to 20 good slaves in the ordinary. His deputy John Cassin further elaborated, "Sometime past we are so much reduced as not able to man a boat or even to wash the decks of one of the ships. As seaman are not to be obtained at the present wages, I therefore suggest to you the propriety of employing a few slaves... as I think they will ...answer for many of our purposes as Seaman."<sup>[2]</sup> Numerous enslaved African Americans were listed naval shipyard as "Landsman" or "Ordinary" Seaman. On 6 December 1845 Commodore Jesse Wilkinson Commandant of the Gosport Navy Yard confirmed this long standing practice to the Secretary of the Navy, George Bancroft "that a majority of them [blacks] are negro slaves, and that a large portion of those employed in the Ordinary for many years, have been of that description, but by what authority I am unable to say as nothing can be found in the records of my office on the subject – These men have been examined by the Surgeon of the Yard and regularly Shipped [enlisted] for twelve months"<sup>[3][4]</sup>This subterfuge continued until the Civil War.

The law of 1792, which generally prohibited enlistment of blacks in the Army, became the United States Army's official policy until 1862. Due to its chronic shortage of personnel, the Navy never bothered with any restrictions on the enlistment of African-Americans.

## Civil War

---

The Civil War was no doubt the pivotal moment in deciding the fate of African-Americans. A Union victory would mean a swift end to the institution of slavery. A victory for the Confederacy would continue the institution. From the beginning the war was not seen as a war to end slavery; it was seen as a war to preserve the union. The enlistment of blacks on either side was unheard of outside of state militias until 17 July 1862; Congress passed two acts allowing the enlistment of African-Americans. However, official enrollment occurred only after September 1862. From the moment they donned the uniforms of the Union, African-Americans proved themselves to be invaluable troops; they exceeded all expectations. At first, however, they were not employed on the battlefield; instead, they were used as labor. White soldiers and officers believed that black men lacked the ability to fight well. African-American soldiers of the 1st Kansas Colored Volunteers silenced their critics by repulsing attacking Confederate guerrillas at the skirmish at Island Mound, Missouri in October 1862.

Although black soldiers proved themselves as reputable soldiers, discrimination in pay and other areas remained widespread. According to the Militia Act of 1862, soldiers of African descent were to receive \$10.00 a month, with an optional deduction for clothing at \$3.00. In contrast, white privates received \$13.00 per month plus a clothing allowance of \$3.50.

Following the Civil War, an effort was made to allow blacks to attend the United States Naval Academy. John H. Conyers of South Carolina was nominated by South Carolina congressman Robert Elliot and became a midshipman on 21 September 1872.<sup>[5]</sup> During his first year at the academy, Conyers was subject to severe, ongoing hazing, including verbal torment, shunning, and beatings. His classmates even attempted to drown him, among other abuses. Conyers finally yielded to the chronic academic, physical, and mental haranguing and resigned in October 1873.<sup>[6]</sup>

## Philippine-American War

---

After the Treaty of Paris, the islands of the Philippines became a colony of the United States. When the U.S. Military started to send soldiers into the islands, most of the native population who had already been fighting their former Spanish rulers, opposed U.S. colonization and retaliated, causing an insurrection. In what would be known as the Philippine-American War, the U.S. Military also sent colored regiments and units to stop the insurrection. However, due to the discrimination of African-American soldiers, many of them defected to the Philippine Army.

One of those who defected was David Fagen, who was given the rank of Captain in the Philippine Army. Fagen served in the 24th Regiment of the U.S. Army, but on November 17, 1899,<sup>[7]</sup> he defected to the Filipino army.<sup>[8]</sup> He became a successful guerrilla leader and his capture became an obsession to the U.S. military and American public. His defection was likely the result of differential treatment by American occupational forces toward black soldiers, as well as common American forces derogatory treatment and views of the Filipino occupational resistance, who were frequently referred to as "niggers" and "gugus".<sup>[9]</sup>

After two other black deserters were captured and executed, President Theodore Roosevelt announced he would stop executing captured deserters.<sup>[10]</sup> As the war ended, the US gave amnesties to most of their opponents. A substantial reward was offered for Fagen, who was considered a traitor. There are two conflicting versions of his fate: one is that his was the partially decomposed head for which the reward was claimed, the other is that he took a local wife and lived peacefully in the mountains.<sup>[11]</sup>

## World War I

---

When the call finally came for men to join the army, African-Americans were eager to enlist. By the war's end over 350,000 African-Americans had joined the American ranks. While they were eager to join the fight, the U.S. military was still segregated. The white officers didn't particularly like the idea of arming blacks and training them in how to use the weapons. Most African-American units were largely relegated to support roles and did not see combat.

When the Americans finally arrived in France, the allied commanders pleaded for soldiers. They already had competent officers – they just needed soldiers. The American commander General John J. Pershing refused to cannibalize any of his units nor send them into combat until they were ready. Instead he relinquished his black soldiers to their command.

## Interwar period

---

"The Navy's racial segregation policies limited African Americans' participation in World War I and, after the war, barred black enlistments altogether from 1919 to 1932. The only black sailors in uniform during that period were the ones aboard in 1919 who were allowed to stay to retire."

In 1932 Blacks were allowed to serve on US Navy ships as stewards and mess attendants.<sup>[12]</sup>

## World War II

---

During World War II, African-American enlistment was at an all-time high, with more than 1 million serving in the armed forces.<sup>[13]</sup> However, the U.S. military was still heavily segregated. The marines had no black enlisted in combat infantry. There were blacks in the Navy Seabees and the United States Air Force (Tuskegee Airmen). The army had only five African-American officers.<sup>[13]</sup> In addition, no African-American would receive the Medal of Honor during the war, and their tasks in the war were largely reserved to noncombat units. Black soldiers had to sometimes give up their seats in trains to the Nazi prisoners of war.<sup>[13]</sup>

An example of how African American's received different treatment for their actions were the 17th Special Naval Construction Battalion and the 16th Marine Field Depot on the island of Peleliu, 15–18 September 1944. On D-day the 7th Marines were in a situation where they did not have enough men to man the lines and get the wounded to safety. Coming to their aid were the 2 companies of the 16 Marine Field Depot (segregated) and the 17th Special Seabee (segregated). That night the Japanese mounted a counter-attack at 0200 hours. The Field Depot Marines are recorded as again having humped ammunition, to the front lines on the stretchers they brought the wounded back on and picked up rifles to become infantrymen. By the time it was over nearly the entire 17th CB had volunteered along side them. The Seabee record states that besides humping ammo and helping wounded they volunteered to man the line where the wounded had been, man 37mm that had lost their crews and volunteered for anything dangerous. The 17th remained with the 7th Marines until the right flank had been secured D-plus 3.<sup>[14][15][16][17][18][19]</sup> According to the Military History Encyclopedia on the Web, were it not for the "Black Marine shore party personal" the counterattack on the 7th Marines would not have been repulsed.<sup>[20]</sup>

- On Peleliu when all was done, the white shore party detachments from the 33rd and 73rd CBs received Presidential Unit Citations as did the primary shore party (1st Marine Pioneers).<sup>[21]</sup> The Commander of the 17th Special CB (segregated) received the same commendatory letter as the Company Commanders of the 7th Marine Ammo Co. (segregated) and the 11th Marine Depot Co.(segregated). Before the battle was even over, Major General Rupertus USMC wrote to each that: "THE NEGRO RACE CAN WELL BE PROUD OF THE WORK PREFORMED [by the 11th Marine Depot Company/ 7th Marine Ammunition Company/ 17th CB]. THE WHOLEHEARTED CO-OPERATION AND UNTIRING EFFORTS WHICH DEMONSTRATED IN EVERY RESPECT THAT THEY APPRECIATED THE PRIVILEGE OF WEARING A MARINE UNIFORM AND SERVING WITH THE MARINES IN COMBAT. PLEASE CONVEY TO YOUR COMMAND THESE SENTIMENTS AND INFORM THEM THAT IN THE EYES OF THE ENTIRE DIVISION THEY HAVE EARNED A "WELL DONE"."<sup>[22][23]</sup> The Department of the Navy made an official press release of a copy the 17th CB's letter on November 28, 1944.<sup>[24]</sup>

It would take over 50 years and a presidential order before the U.S. Army reviewed their records in order to award any Medals of Honor to black soldiers. This war marked the end of segregation in the U.S. military. In 1948 President Truman signed Executive Order 9981, officially ending segregation and racial inequality in the military.

## See also

---

- Racial segregation in the United States Armed Forces
- Military history of African Americans

## References

---

1. *The encyclopedia of the Vietnam War : a political, social, and military history* (<https://www.worldcat.org/oclc/729629958>). Tucker, Spencer, 1937- (2nd ed.). Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO. 2011. ISBN 9781851099603. OCLC 729629958 (<https://www.worldcat.org/oclc/729629958>).
2. John G. Sharp *The Washington Navy Yard Strike and "Snow Riot" of 1835* 2019 <http://www.usgwarchives.net/va/portsmouth/shipyard/washingtonsy.html>
3. Wilkinson to Bancroft 6 December 1845 NARA M125 "Captains Letters" Letter Received from Captains 1805 -1885, 1 Nov 1845 – 31 Dec 1845, dated 6 Dec 1845, letter number 84, 1-2
4. John G.M. Sharp *List of Gosport Navy Yard Employees Military and Civilian, 1846* <http://www.usgwarchives.net/va/portsmouth/shipyard/nnysharp13.html>
5. "Black History Legends Nuggets" (<http://www.blackhistoryusa.com/legends.php>). Retrieved 9 March 2013.
6. Clare, Rod (July 2005). "The Sixth Wave: Black Integration in the U.S. Naval Academy" (<http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10761>). Retrieved 9 March 2013.
7. "A HOMAGE TO DAVID FAGEN, AFRICAN-AMERICAN SOLDIER IN THE PHILIPPINE REVOLUTION" ([https://www.academia.edu/242727/A\\_HOMAGE\\_TO\\_DAVID\\_FAGEN\\_AFRICAN-AMERICAN\\_SOLDIER\\_IN\\_THE\\_PHILIPPINE\\_REVOLUTION](https://www.academia.edu/242727/A_HOMAGE_TO_DAVID_FAGEN_AFRICAN-AMERICAN_SOLDIER_IN_THE_PHILIPPINE_REVOLUTION)). *www.academia.edu*. p. 20. Retrieved 15 December 2015.
8. Rudy Rimando, "Interview with Historical Novelist William Schroder: Before Iraq, There Was the Philippines" (<http://hnn.us/articles/8658>), November 28, 2004, *History news Network* (<http://hnn.us>).
9. Ryan, David (2014). Cullinane, Michael Patrick (ed.). *U.S. Foreign Policy and the Other* (<https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=pyMfAwAAQBAJ&pg=PA114&dq=David+Fagen+defection&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0CEEQ6AEwBWoVChMIqLfp8liNxxwIVSTs-ChOZyQNE#v=onepage&q=David%20Fagen%20defection&f=false>). Berghahn. pp. 114–115. ISBN 978-1782384397. Retrieved 3 August 2015.
10. William T. Bowers; William M. Hammond; George L. MacGarrigle (May 1997). *Black Soldier, White Army: The 24th Infantry Regiment in Korea* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=s5smqFkTmclC>). DIANE Publishing. pp. 12 (<https://books.google.com/books?id=s5smqFkTmclC&pg=PA12>). ISBN 978-0-7881-3990-1.
11. The Saga of David Fagen (<https://web.archive.org/web/20091027112545/http://www.geocities.com/mnsocialist/fagen.html>)
12. "Defense.gov News Article: African Americans in the Navy" (<http://archive.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=45742>). *archive.defense.gov*. Retrieved 26 January 2019.

13. Foner, Eric (1 February 2012). *Give Me Liberty!: An American History* (3 ed.). W. W. Norton & Company. p. 696. ISBN 0393935531.
14. Ratomski, John J. "Peleliu Shore Party" (<http://www.thomas5.com/tribute/Vets10.html>). *Tribute to Michael A. Lazaro and all other Peleliu Veterans*. Retrieved 18 October 2017.
15. "17th Special NCB cruisebook" (<https://www.history.navy.mil/content/dam/museums/Seabee/Cruisebooks/wwiicruisebooks/specials-cruisebooks/17%20Special.pdf>) (PDF). *Naval History and Heritage Command*. p. 29. Retrieved 18 October 2017.
16. "Seabees of 17th Special Naval Construction Battalion wait to assist wounded of 7th Marines" (<http://worldwar2database.com/gallery/wwii1431>). *World War II Database*. Retrieved 18 October 2017.
17. "African-American Marines of 16th Field Depot Rest on Peleliu" (<http://worldwar2database.com/gallery/wwii1429>). *World War II Database*. Retrieved 18 October 2017.
18. "17 Special Naval Construction Battalion" (<https://www.history.navy.mil/content/dam/museums/Seabee/UnitListPages/SPECIALS/17%20SNCB.pdf>) (PDF). *Naval History and Heritage Command*. Retrieved 18 October 2017.
19. Princeton University Library, Marine Corps Chevron, Vol 3 Number 48, 2 December 1944 [1] (<http://historicperiodicals.princeton.edu/historic/cgi-bin/historic?a=d&d=MarineCorpsChevron19441202-01.2.34&e=-----en-20--1--txt-IN----#>)
20. Peleliu, battle for (Operation Stalemate II) – The Pacific War's Forgotten Battle, September–November 1944, (section: Hitting the Beach, 3rd paragraph), Military History Encyclopedia on the Web, by: Peter D Antill, Tristan Dugdale-Pointon, and Dr John Rickard, [2] ([http://www.historyofwar.org/articles/battles\\_peleliu.html](http://www.historyofwar.org/articles/battles_peleliu.html))
21. 1st Marine Pioneers, PRESIDENTIAL UNIT CITATION, First Marine Division, Reinforced, Assault and seizure of Peleliu and Ngesebus, Palau Islands, Part II. UNIT AWARDS, Section 1, Navy-Marine Corps Awards Manual(Rev 1953) p.15 Naval History and Heritage Command, [3] (<https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/n/navy-mc-awards-manual-rev1953/pt2-unit-awards.html>)
22. The Right to Fight:African American Marines in WWII, Peleliu and Iwo Jima, Bernard C. Naulty, Marine Corps Historical Center, Building 58, Washington Navy Yard, Washington D.C. 20374, 1974, PCN 190-003132-00 [4] ([https://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online\\_books/npswapa/extcontent/usmc/pcn-190-003132-00/sec10.htm](https://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online_books/npswapa/extcontent/usmc/pcn-190-003132-00/sec10.htm))
23. African Americans at War: an Encyclopedia, Volume I, Jonathan D. Sutherland, ABC, CLIO, Santa Barabra, Ca, 2004, p. 480, ISBN 1-57607-746-2[5] ([https://books.google.com/books?id=arI0HSFXwLkC&pg=PA480&lpg=PA480&dq=commendation+letter+16th+Marine+Field+Depot+on+Peleliu&source=bl&ots=HRgV4gd335&sig=ACfU3U0knHWQPgJjq1eUfP9QU16FIVvxYQ&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwikd6xq\\_HgAhWC7IMKHxKoCmQQ6AEwC3oECAUQAQ#v=onepage&q=commendation%20letter%2016th%20Marine%20Field%20Depot%20on%20Peleliu&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=arI0HSFXwLkC&pg=PA480&lpg=PA480&dq=commendation+letter+16th+Marine+Field+Depot+on+Peleliu&source=bl&ots=HRgV4gd335&sig=ACfU3U0knHWQPgJjq1eUfP9QU16FIVvxYQ&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwikd6xq_HgAhWC7IMKHxKoCmQQ6AEwC3oECAUQAQ#v=onepage&q=commendation%20letter%2016th%20Marine%20Field%20Depot%20on%20Peleliu&f=false))
24. "17th Special NCB cruisebook" (<https://www.history.navy.mil/content/dam/museums/Seabee/Cruisebooks/wwiicruisebooks/specials-cruisebooks/17%20Special.pdf>) (PDF). *Naval History and Heritage Command*. p. 29. Retrieved 18 October 2017.

## External links

---

- <http://seabeesmagazine.navylive.dodlive.mil/2014/03/06/building-for-a-nation-and-equality-african-american-seabees-in-world-war-ii/> Seabee Magazine
  - <https://web.archive.org/web/20091002220527/http://www.ufphq.com/aams.htm>
  - <http://www.history.army.mil/html/moh/mohb.html>
  - Michael Lee Lanning. *The African-American Soldier: From Crispus Attucks to Colin Powell*. New York: Birch Lane, 1997
  - Krewasky A. Salter. *Combat Multipliers: African-American soldiers in four wars* (<http://usacac.army.mil/cac2/cgsc/carl/download/csipubs/CombatMultipliers.pdf>)
- 

Retrieved from "https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Racism\_against\_African\_Americans\_in\_the\_U.S.\_military&oldid=916822113"

Text is available under the [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike License](#); additional terms may apply. By using this site, you agree to the [Terms of Use](#) and [Privacy Policy](#). Wikipedia® is a registered trademark of the [Wikimedia Foundation, Inc.](#), a non-profit organization.