

## ***THE WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION***

***Classroom: Grades 9-12***

***President and Public Pressure: "For a Redress of Grievances"***

***Activity - Proud to Serve***



*Harry Truman ordered integration of military units - Harry S. Truman Library*

### ***Background***

As the United States began to rearm in the summer of 1940, black citizens had flocked to recruiting stations only to be met with obstacles. Historian Doris Kearns Goodwin notes that "in Charlotte, North Carolina, a Negro high-school teacher holding a master's degree from Columbia had been severely beaten by white soldiers at a recruiting office when he sought information for his students."<sup>3</sup> In *No Ordinary Time*, Goodwin describes the determination of fifteen Negro sailors aboard the USS Philadelphia to speak up against the discrimination they were experiencing. In an open letter to the Pittsburgh Courier they wrote:

Our main reason for writing is to let all our colored mothers and fathers know how their sons are treated after taking an oath pledging allegiance and loyalty to their flag and country. . . . We sincerely hope to discourage any other colored boys who might have planned to join the Navy and make the same mistake we did. All they will become is seagoing bell hops, chambermaids and dishwashers. We take it upon ourselves to write this letter regardless of any action the Navy authorities may take. We know it could not possibly surpass the mental cruelty inflicted upon us on this ship.<sup>4</sup> As Goodwin notes, "The navy's reaction to the published letter was swift and severe. The signers were placed in the brig, indicted for conduct prejudicial to good order, and given dishonorable discharged for 'unfitness.'"<sup>5</sup>

Metz T. P. Lochard describes an even more overt example of discrimination within the military. Writing in *The Nation*, January 4, 1941, he recalled:

On June 5, 1939, the Secretary of War, testifying before a subcommittee of the House Committee on Appropriations, stated that the War Department was studying ways to provide training for Negro pilots. As yet no Negro is being trained for service in the army air corps as either a flying cadet or an enlisted mechanic. The Secretary of War designated a school at Glenfield, Illinois but the War Department has refused to accept Negroes in that corps. On October 11, Garland F. Pinkston, a Negro, received the following letter signed by Herbert M. West, Jr., First Lieutenant, United States Air Corps, Recorder:

Dear Sir: Through the most unfortunate circumstances, your application was allowed to be completed because of our ignorance of your race. At the present time the United States Army is not training any except members of the white race for duty as pilots of military aircraft.<sup>6</sup>

It was circumstances such as these that prompted A. Philip Randolph to heighten his efforts to secure the desegregation of the armed forces. Since the early 1940s, the United States has participated in World War II, the Korean, Vietnam, and Gulf Wars, and dozens of other military engagements abroad. Your task in the activity below is to collect information from current U.S. armed forces personnel and veterans who have experienced military life firsthand.

***Activity:***

1. As a class, make a list of people, either black or white, that you and your classmates know either through family or community connections who are currently in the military or who are veterans. Determine if possible in which branch of the military each person served. If you can identify a time frame when each person on the list served, put that information beside the name. Rearrange the names in chronological order to arrive at a master "bank" of names. Discuss with your classmates whether your list is representative of the

military branches and several time frames. Note: You may need to check phone books or talk with parents or neighbors to gather all of this information.

2. After your class believes it has a good "bank of names," each student in the class should choose one person's name from the list to contact for an interview – go to *Lesson 1, Activities, [As If It Were Only Yesterday]* for instructions on how to set up the interview.
3. Work with your classmates to develop a set of basic questions that all interviewers, including you, will use to establish a historical context. For example:

What is your ethnic background and sex?

Specifically when were you in the military?

In what branch of the military did you serve (army, air force, navy, etc.), and what was your specialty (pilot, artilleryman, infantryman, sonar technician, etc.)?

Did you enlist, or were you drafted?

Is/was the military your intended career?

What rank did you hold?

Were you an active participant in any war or military action?

4. Work with your classmates to develop a set of questions that will help you assess changes in conditions of equality for blacks in the armed services over time. For example:

From the time you entered the military until you left, did you see changes in the way blacks were treated within your service branch?

While in the service, did you observe examples of prejudice based on color? If so, relate at least one incident.

After reading to the interviewee the situations described in the background for this activity, ask him or her: In your military experience, did you ever know or hear of any incidents that were similar to those given in these examples?

While serving in the military did you ever believe you were either given a special advantage or put at a disadvantage because of your race?

While you were in the service, did any new laws change racial policies affecting your military duty?

While you were in the service, what were the positive benefits you saw from interacting with someone of another race?

In what way was serving in a multiracial military group different from your mixed-race interactions before entering the armed services?

Overall, do you feel the military today gives black Americans the same benefits as whites? Why or why not?

5. After you and your classmates have completed interviews, organize yourselves into groups based on as many common interviewee characteristics as possible: for example, one group might be black enlisted personnel who served in the armed forces after the Vietnam War. Use your individual interview information as a basis for discussing common threads that either validate the belief that discrimination still exists in the armed services or support the belief that conditions have drastically improved.
6. Share your group's findings with the class in two ways:  
  
Describe at least one dramatic personal example, either positive or negative, from those that were related in the group's discussion of interviewee experiences.  
  
As a group, write four or five conclusions that you reached as a result of your discussions. Record them on a large sheet of poster or tag board for display.
7. After all groups have posted their conclusions, ask students to notice whether or not the opinions of the groups varied. Discuss how the factor of "point of view" might have shaped the conclusions reached by the interviewees. After you complete this exercise, work with the whole class to combine all conclusions into a list of generalizations.
8. If possible, ask a panel of interviewees from at least three time periods (for example, one representing the 1950s, another the 1970s, another the 1990s) to talk with the class about their unique military experiences. Ask each panel participant to comment on whether he or she finds the generalizations formulated by the class valid.

### *Alternatives*

1. After students have generalized about changes in the military over the last three or four decades, illustrate at least one of the described changes in some creative way— in a mural, for example, or a drawing, poetry, or music.
2. Write a marching song that describes changes in the armed services using the tune "Sound Off."
3. Using the Guide to Periodical Literature or the Internet, conduct research to determine how other minority groups such as women or gays have been treated in the U.S. military. Are their struggles similar to those experienced by black Americans or uniquely different? Using the information you gleaned from the research, report to the class on the status of either women or gays in the armed services, and compare those findings with the experiences of blacks in the military.