

Blacks and the Navy

Black History Month is a time for observing the numerous achievements of Black men and women in American society. The professionalism and achievements of Black Americans have enhanced the United States Navy since 1978.

In the Navy, the heroic history of Black Americans can be traced back through every national conflict since the Revolutionary War, when about twenty percent of the sailors manning Continental Navy vessels were Blacks.

But from the first Black enlistee in the war for independence, to over 40,000 Black men and women officers and enlisted people today, the story of Blacks in naval history has been an uphill battle of "firsts."

"It was pure hell to be the first Black anything," recalls Dr. Samuel E. Barnes, the chairman of health and physical education at the University of District of Columbia, who was among the first of thirteen Black naval officers commissioned as a group in the winter of 1944. "We felt fortunate, humbled and a great responsibility to represent the Black sailors of the past, present and those who would follow."

Although Black enlistees of the past were restricted to the steward and messmen job ratings until as late as 1943, the Black sailor of today is represented in virtually every occupation, technical rating and paygrade.

"There was a time when certain ratings weren't open to minorities - even though the law, or rules, didn't say they were

closed," explained Commander Mack Gaston, 37, of Dalton, Georgia, who today is the only Black destroyer commanding officer presently assigned to the Pacific Fleet. "While there are still some problems, the equal opportunity programs and opportunities for promotions in both the officer and enlisted ranks have become unlimited, in my opinion."

Those ranks include three Black admirals and 5.5 percent of the Navy's chief petty officers. And although it took 195 years before the appointment of the first Black officer to the rank of rear admiral in 1971 - Captain Samuel L. Gravely Jr., today Vice Admiral Gravely, Commander, Third Fleet - the unrestricted line community today is made up of more than 450 Black officers.

Of the 54 officer programs available in today's Navy, including training programs and specialties in the fields of medicine, law, religion, aviation, supply, engineering and surface warfare related areas, the Navy's objective in officer candidate recruitment is that at least six percent be Black and two percent be other minorities.

Being the member of two minority groups doesn't worry 27-year-old Lieutenant Doris Forte of Houston, Texas, who is the first Black woman doctor admitted to the Navy in the field of optometry.

"Being the first Black woman really doesn't bother me," she said from her office at Naval

Regional Medical Center in San Diego. "In college I often found myself being the majority of one. But optometry is a very good profession for women although it isn't reflected in numbers yet in the Navy or civilian life."

Likewise, Navy Radioman Third Class Denita G. Harvey from Los Angeles, who was picked for her outstanding performance as a student to become a full-time faculty instructor at basic Radioman technical school in San Diego, says that what really matters in life is helping other people.

"I'm fond of working with people," said the 21-year-old radioman, as she went about her duties of teaching the skills necessary to run the Navy's sophisticated communication equipment. "I've been working with people since high school and my pre-med days as a student at the University of Southern California."

Among the first Blacks to be commissioned late in 1944 - a year which recorded the first Black officer and the first Black woman "Wave" - was Thomas D. Parham Jr., a native of Durham, North Carolina.

Parham, is Captain and 57-year-old Chief of Pastoral Care Service at Naval Regional Medical Center, Portsmouth, Virginia, was the second Black chaplain and second Black Captain in the Navy. He's one of fifteen Black ministers of a total 850 chaplains on active duty, and he's dedicated his life to making sure the



The crew who, with Robert Smalls, escaped the Confederacy and gave their ship to the U.S. Navy.

whole flock is spiritually represented.

"Black enlisted servicemen and those of other races as well, need people of their own ethnic backgrounds to look up to as men and women in authority and prominence," he explained. "But many Black clergymen feel there's a cause out in the streets too important to forsake to come in the Navy."

Navy Lieutenant Commander Robert Lawhorn of Camden, South Carolina, is another man who has had opportunities open up to him as the result of other Black innovators with causes.

Lawhorn, a naval flight officer and instructor with Fighter Squadron 124 at Miramar Naval Air Station in San Diego, is one of 188 Black officers in the field of naval aviation today to follow on



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Best wishes and congratulations . . .

Commissioner Frank Ivancie