

Discrimination Ended in Armed Services



RECREATION AREA DISAPPEARING — house on dry land. So far in 1963 the Dallas White Rock Lake, once the water supply for Dallas, Texas, but now a recreation area, is slowly shrinking, the victim of a prolonged drought. The lake was 4 1/2 feet below spillway level. The receding shoreline left this boat-

By DARRELL GARWOOD
United Press International
WASHINGTON (UPI) — Ask the Defense department whether racial segregation has been abolished in the armed services and the answer is an unqualified yes.

Ask whether Negro servicemen enjoy equal opportunity for advancement and the answer is yes, but with qualifications.

It depends, apparently, on how intelligent the Negro was when he enlisted or was drafted; or whether he had previously enjoyed equal opportunity in private life; or whether he had been denied adequate education or was held back by local segregation customs.

President Harry S. Truman ordered racial barriers abolished in the service branches 15 years ago—the first such blow struck for Negro servicemen. President Kennedy and Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara now are expanding the doctrine to off-base communities.

Desegregation Fact
Today, according to Alfred B. Fitt, deputy assistant secretary of defense for civil rights, on-base desegregation is fact, not fancy, though the U.S. Civil Rights commission takes some exception to that. It reported recently that Negro servicemen were still meeting a little on-base discrimination.

On whether the Negroes are getting an equal chance for advancement, Fitt, 40-year-old Yale graduate from Michigan, had a different answer. In sub-

stance, it was that the opportunity is there if the Negro is qualified.

"Where qualifications are equal in the junior and non-commissioned officer ranks," he said in a UPI interview, "Our studies indicate that Negroes are advancing as rapidly as whites."

"We have to take the man as he comes to us. If he had 18 or 20 years of unequal opportunity before entering the service this is bound, in the average case, to make it harder for him."

It is a fact that few Negroes qualify for military service. They number only 8.2 per cent of the 2.7 million defense forces. Those accepted do not necessarily have equal qualifications.

Few Negro Officers

President Kennedy's committee on equal opportunity in the armed forces emphasized that statistical discrepancy in a report last summer. It said Negroes comprise only two-tenths of one per cent of the officers in the Navy and Marine corps, and 3.2 and 1.2 per cent, respectively, in the Army and Air Force.

Fitt said this was due in part to the fact that only 15 years have passed since Truman's historic order. But it also is true that the percentage of Negroes receiving appointments to the service academies—West Point, Annapolis and Colorado Springs—is but a raindrop in a big ocean.

Fitt's primary job is to achieve equal opportunity for all members of the defense

forces under a directive issued by McNamara last July 26.

The emphasis has now swung to off-base discrimination—a new and delicate field for the military.

In his order, McNamara directed hundreds of commanders to submit reports on off-base racial barriers. They were warned that segregation anywhere damages a soldier's morale and military potential and "They should oppose such practices on every occasion."

Vinson Protests

This brought outraged cries from southern members of congress who feared communities in their district might be placed "off limits" for white and Negro troops alike. Chairman Carl Vinson (D-Ga.), of the House Armed Services committee and one of the most influential men in Congress, introduced a bill calling for court-martial of any commander who enforces such a rule.

Fitt emphasized that sharp restrictions had been placed on the use of such authority.

"I want to make it entirely clear that the defense department is not seeking to desegregate civilian communities; we just ask that they stop discriminating against servicemen," he said. "I think we have a reasonable program. When a man is in service and has no choice over where he's stationed, I've never found anyone yet who didn't think he should have equal treatment—but the fact of the matter is that many of them don't get equal treatment now."

McNamara's directive said a commander "shall not, except

with prior approval of the secretary of his military department, use the off-limits sanction in discrimination cases." The order said elsewhere that "every military commander has the responsibility to oppose discriminatory practices affecting his men . . . in nearby communities where they may live or gather in off-duty hours."

Report off-Base

On Oct. 2 the Defense department issued another directive. This one asked the commanders to report off-base discrimination in detail so the department can obtain "necessary information for the formulation of future policy."

All answers must be in by Nov. 8.

A typical question was whether white and Negro military dependent children ride in separate school buses or: "Do white and Negro personnel have equal opportunity for adequate housing off-base?"

These subjects also highlighted the U.S. Civil Rights commission report. It said the Negro faces the traditional patterns of segregation off his post. It added:

"These practices in housing, education and public and recreational facilities are galling reminders that second-class citizenship has not been eradicated, and have a detrimental impact on military morale and efficiency."

Critical of Navy

The report was more critical of the Navy, saying it used fewer Negro enlisted men and officers than the Army and Air Force and assigned them less frequently to clerical, technical

and skilled occupations than in civilian life.

The commission said that on the whole, the armed forces had made "great progress" in affording equal opportunity to Negroes but it added: "This progress has not been uniform, and areas remain which require prompt corrective action on the

part of the defense department."

Fitt said he hoped the off-limit rule will never have to be applied, and he believes there is a good chance that will be the case. He said that within the services, soldiers, sailors and airmen from the Deep South present no special problem in desegregation.

To date, the Defense department has reported no major instances of white and Negro racial clashes in the defense forces.



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MEDFORD TRIBUNE

MEDFORD, OREGON, THURSDAY, OCTOBER 17, 1963

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