

Fifty years ago this month, racial segregation was abolished in the armed forces.

The Air Force led the way toward integration in the services. Integrated units and aircrews, such as this B-26 crew with (l-r) A3C Dennis Judd and Lt. Donald Mansfield and Bill Ralston were standard during the Korean War.



When the Color Line Ended

By Herman S. Wolk



THE summer of 1998 marks the 50th anniversary of President Harry S. Truman's executive order directing the military services to enforce "equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons ... without regard to race, color, religion, or national origin." Truman directed that this policy be put into effect as soon as possible, consonant with efficiency and morale. Prior to the President's action, the fledgling United States Air Force in 1948 had already begun to move toward integration. Secretary of the Air Force Stuart Symington possessed the vision to lead the service in throwing off the shackles of segregation, in effect setting an example for American society.

The story of how the Air Force, in a few short years after World War II, moved from "segregated skies" to fully integrating its forces revolves around several themes: clear recognition of segregation as an inefficient military use of manpower; increased pressure from the African-American community; election-year politics in 1948; and farsighted leadership provided by officers and civilians in the Air Force and defense establishment.

The US Army (including the Army Air Corps) prior to World War II reflected the biases of American society; there were few blacks (in 1937, only 6,500 in an Army of 360,000) and segregation was the norm. During the military buildup prior to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the War Department directed the Air Corps to develop a plan for increased numbers of black Americans. These troops were to be in segregated units, in keeping with long-standing Army policy.

Separate but Equal

The Air Corps decided to establish technical training for African-American



Tuskegee Airmen like Lt. Clinton Mills (left) and Lt. Howard Baugh—here chalking up on a P-40 their morning's score of Nazi vehicle kills—contributed to the outstanding record compiled by African-Americans in World War II.

cans at Chanute Field, Ill., and pilot training at Tuskegee, Ala. The Air Corps directed that facilities at Tuskegee would be “fully equivalent, with respect to the character of living conditions, facilities, equipment, and training, to that provided for white personnel under similar conditions.”

In other words, the concept was “separate but equal.”

The Army’s Chief of Staff, Gen. George C. Marshall, said that, in World War II, society dictated that it was absolutely necessary for the War Department to follow a policy of segregation. The military, he reasoned, should not be on the leading edge of change in this regard. However, after the Pearl Harbor tragedy, with increasing numbers of African-Americans entering the service, the Army Air Forces faced the difficult problem of attempting to absorb large numbers of blacks in a relatively short time.

The armed forces thus became a kind of proving ground. The military was forced to confront—within units and in the communities surrounding its bases—the same racial problems that plagued American society as a whole.

By June 1944, there would be almost 150,000 African-Americans in the AAF in a force of over two million. Most served in support units such as air base defense, quartermaster, ordnance, and transportation. The majority were assigned to jobs in aviation squadrons

which did not require high skill levels. Not surprisingly, employment of these large numbers of Americans in menial tasks resulted in low morale amongst the troops, who protested being relegated to segregated units.

It was the black flying units, however, that attracted the most attention. In January 1941, the War Department announced the establishment of the 99th Pursuit Squadron and the Tuskegee training program. Observers noted that the Air Corps decided on pursuit training because bomber training would have required navigators, bombardiers, and gunners, with the great pressure this would have placed on segregated facilities. Subsequently, the AAF formed the 332d Fighter Group, consisting of three additional squadrons.

The 99th arrived in the Mediterranean theater in 1943 and the 332d deployed in early 1944 to the same theater. The AAF did form a black bombardment group, the 477th, which trained in 1944–45 at Selfridge Field, Mich., Godman Field, Ky., and Freeman Field, Ind. Subsequently, units of the 477th joined returning personnel of the 332d to form the 477th Composite Group, headed by Col. Benjamin O. Davis Jr., a 1936 graduate of West Point and son of Brig. Gen. Benjamin O. Davis Sr., who at that time was the highest ranking African-American officer. During the war, the younger Davis commanded the 99th and then the 332d.

The 99th and the 332d enjoyed success in the Mediterranean theater, and in mid-1944 the 99th joined the 332d. The group, under Davis, participated in campaigns in Italy, France, Romania, Germany, and the Balkans. The 332d Group earned the Distinguished Unit Citation. Lt. Gen. Ira C. Eaker, commander in chief of the Mediterranean Allied Air Forces, noted that the 332d performed well in combat. The 477th Bombardment Group, however, suffered a different experience. It began training at Selfridge, moved to Godman Field, then to Freeman Field, and then back to Godman. White officers of the 477th were indifferent to the needs of the unit, and after more than 100 black officers staged a walk-in protest at the segregated officers club at Freeman Field in April 1945, this unit was on the verge of collapse. By the end of the war, it never had an opportunity to perform its mission.

The Role of Parrish

Despite overcrowding at Tuskegee Field, the 99th and the 332d, both units commanded by black officers, were fortunate to have Col. Noel F. Parrish as Tuskegee Field commander from December 1942 to 1946. Parrish was an enlightened Kentuckian who worked well with blacks and whites. He understood problems in the South and improved relations with the town of Tuskegee. He addressed local groups and understood white Southerners. Morale at Tuskegee improved and Parrish earned the respect of blacks. One African-American pilot noted: “The only thing that struck me was why have a white in charge of the base when there were qualified blacks, but if there had to be a white, he was the best one.”

The AAF’s experience with black units during the war indicated that the most important factors were the attitude and competence of the local commander. Parrish was a standout, but unfortunately, other commanders lacked his ability to understand the dynamics of race relations and how to improve morale. The fact was that African-Americans were patriotic. They made outstanding contributions to the war effort at home and abroad, but they were indignant at segrega-

tion in society and in the military. The black community during the war fought segregation and kept the pressure on the War Department to change its discriminatory policies. This pressure forced the Army Air Forces to increase opportunities for African-Americans.

Thus, in the immediate postwar period, the military realized it would have to formulate new racial policies. Pragmatically, military efficiency demanded it. In the wake of demobilization, there would be a higher percentage of blacks in the military since many wanted the security of a military career, preferring not to re-enter a hostile society. The AAF quickly realized that it had to make much more effective use of manpower, and this meant bringing



Benjamin Davis Jr., in the cockpit of his P-51 (above), was barred initially from flight training because of color but went on to lead black flying units and to become the first African-American Air Force officer to achieve general's rank. He set an example for black airmen like SSgt. William Accoo (above), whose meticulous care of a Mustang gives it a mirror finish.

African-Americans into skilled jobs.

After the Japanese surrender, based on a recommendation by Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy, the Secretary of War, Robert P. Patterson, directed Marshall to appoint a board to review the Army's racial policy. The board, chaired by Army Lt. Gen. Alvan C. Gillem Jr., was ordered to formulate a policy to more efficiently employ African-Americans in the postwar Army.

The Gillem board noted that the Navy's use of "limited integration" had improved the performance of blacks without attendant race problems. Late in the war, the Navy had integrated ves-

sels in the auxiliary fleet. However, the great majority of black sailors remained in the separate Steward's Branch. The board concluded that the Army must make efficient use of black manpower in a proportion corresponding to civilian society and "must eliminate, at the earliest practicable moment, any special consideration based on race... and should point towards the immediate objective of an evaluation of the Negro on the basis of individual merit and ability."

Not Nearly Enough

Although the board's proposals amounted to a clear advance, crit-

ics—including Truman K. Gibson, a notable black American who had advised the War Department on racial policy—emphasized that the report lacked a clear statement on segregation; failed to recommend elimination of the black quota based on a percentage (10 percent) of the civilian population; and also failed to articulate specific steps toward integration. The AAF's reaction to the report was perhaps best summed up by Eaker, at the time AAF deputy commander, who concluded the War Department "should never be ahead of popular opinion" in this matter. Eaker, however, also made clear that the AAF should emphasize integrated flying schools and that blacks should be based where community attitudes were favorable.

Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, Army Chief of Staff, and Patterson approved the Gillem board's report, which was published as War Department Circular 124, in April 1946. Nonetheless, the fact remained that the War Department had not yet arrived at the point of ordering integration of its forces. As noted, after the war black civil rights groups in the United States stepped up their campaign to end segregation in the military. Although the Gillem report stopped far short of calling for integration, significant changes were on the horizon. Having achieved independence in September 1947, the United States Air Force was prepared to move in new directions, and this included race relations. Even prior to



Lts. Dempsey Morgan, Carroll Woods, and Bob Nelson, Capt. Andrew Turner, and Lt. "Lucky" Lester of the 100th Fighter Squadron were some of the pilots whose skills forced the AAF to look into increasing opportunities for blacks.

becoming the first Secretary of the Air Force, Stuart Symington, as assistant secretary of war for air, recognized the need for equal opportunity for African-Americans. His mother had been one of the earliest civil rights advocates in Baltimore. As president of the Emerson Electric Manufacturing Co. of St. Louis, Symington made it a point to place blacks in professional positions. He also integrated the cafeterias and the smoking lounges. Symington was not only a tough-minded businessman, he deeply believed in equal opportunity.

Symington's first months as Air Force Secretary coincided with initiation of a study ordered by Lt. Gen. Idwal H. Edwards, deputy chief of staff for personnel, on the impact of segregation in the Air Force. Edwards had been a member of the McCloy committee, and he believed that the Air Force's policy on the employment of blacks was wasteful and had a negative impact upon effectiveness. In early 1948, Edwards directed Lt. Col. Jack F. Marr to investigate and deliver an in-depth study of segregation in the Air Force.

"Eliminate Segregation"

Marr found waste and inefficiency. The 10 percent quota remained a serious problem; in the all-black 332d, for example, in the event of a combat situation, it would not be possible to find sufficient replacements to maintain the unit. Based on Marr's study,

Gen. Carl A. "Tooe" Spaatz, the first Air Force Chief of Staff, emphasized in April 1948 that the Air Force must "eliminate segregation among its personnel by the unrestricted use of Negro personnel in free competition for any duty within the Air Force for which they may qualify." Meanwhile, the Army was dragging its feet. Army Secretary Kenneth C. Royall stated that his service would attempt to improve the status of blacks within a segregated Army. Royall seemed perturbed that the Air Force continued, under Symington, to move toward integration.

There were also difficulties within the Air Force. In 1948, some amongst the top leadership opposed integration. Assistant Secretary of the Air Force Eugene M. Zuckert, whom Symington had designated as his project officer for integration, noted that there were many who needed to be convinced that integration would work for the Air Force. On the other hand, there was an important, dynamic coterie that took its lead from Symington. During a meeting of the Air Board in early January 1948, Jimmy Doolittle, Air Force Association president, retired Maj. Gen. Follett Bradley, and Edwards strongly advocated integration. "I am convinced," emphasized Doolittle, "that the solution to the situation is to forget that they are colored." Industry was in the process of integrating, Doolittle said, "and it is going to be forced on the military. You are merely postponing the inevitable and you might as well take it gracefully." The Air Board noted Army Secretary Royall's reluctance, the problem being the "Army's concept" of moving toward integration.

Symington, Zuckert, and Edwards pressed the issue. In retrospect, it is clear that they made the difference. Symington in effect told the Air Force leadership to get with the program. Then, in mid-1948, the entire landscape of race relations was transformed by President Truman. The subject of civil rights already had been thrust to the forefront



Top USAF leaders pushed the newly independent service toward "unrestricted use of Negro personnel." Here in 1950, Cpl. William Robinson and Pfc. Christopher Otey Jr. man radio facsimile equipment for the 2143d Air Weather Wing, Tokyo.

in this election year by the work of the President's Committee on Civil Rights—which addressed, among other issues, discrimination in the military—and by Truman's Feb. 2, 1948, message to Congress. Although he noted that progress had been made in the armed services, Truman in his message declared: "I have instructed the Secretary of Defense to take steps to have the remaining instances of discrimination in the armed services eliminated as rapidly as possible. The personnel policies and practices of all the services in this regard will be made consistent."

Truman's emphasis on civil rights in 1948, and his acceptance of a strong platform in this regard at the Democratic convention, would lead to a walkout by some Southern states and the birth of the "Dixiecrat revolt." The President persevered, however. Truman had been genuinely outraged at violence perpetrated against blacks in the South.

Truman's Order

Aided by political advisors Clark M. Clifford and Oscar R. Ewing, among others, Truman on July 26, 1948, issued Executive Order 9981—shown in advance to the reluctant Royall—which stated "there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion, or national origin. This policy shall be put into effect as rapidly as possible." Truman directed creation of the President's Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services (known as the Fahy Committee) "to examine into the rules, procedures, and practices in order to determine in what respect such rules, procedures, and practices may be altered or improved with a view to carrying out the policy of this order."

It should be noted that Truman's Secretary of Defense, James V. Forrestal, was an advocate of equal opportunity although he believed that integration could evolve only through specific



The Air Force efforts to judge individuals on their capabilities gave rise to such outstanding leaders as Daniel "Chappie" James Jr., here a colonel commanding the 7272d Flying Training Wing, Wheelus AB, Libya. James became USAF's first African-American four star general.

actions and educational programs of each of the services. Critics denounced Forrestal's approach as "gradualism."

Truman's executive order lent great impetus to the drive toward integration. The Air Force was already on the move. The President's committee would monitor the progress of the services. Symington declared that integration was "the right thing to do" morally, legally, and militarily. Edwards noted in early 1949 that black officers and airmen could now be assigned anywhere in the Air Force according to their qualifications "and the needs of the service." African-Americans would no longer be assigned solely to black units. They would be assigned according to merit rather than quotas. Thus, Benjamin Davis' 332d Fighter Wing would be deactivated, with its men reassigned throughout the Air Force. Black service units would also be deactivated.

As to why the Air Force did not instantly integrate, Marr, who wrote the Air Staff's integration study, emphasized to the Fahy Committee: "We are trying to do our best not to tear the Air Force apart and try to reorganize it overnight." Also, the Air Force wanted

to reassure its own doubters that the task could be completed efficiently. Some have observed that the Air Force almost had completed integration of its forces before the Army even started.

Although historians have generally concluded that integration was primarily fueled by the strictly pragmatic approach of efficiency and the politics of President Truman, an anti-racist philosophy in the Administration certainly existed. At the highest levels of government, this was best expressed by Truman and Secretary Symington. The President, along with close associates Ewing, David Niles, and Clifford, was appalled at the treatment that returning black veterans had received, especially in the South. Symington was a believer, an integrationist whose experience with industry preceded him into government. Everyone in the Air Force would be judged on capabilities. It can truthfully be said that Symington's view was simply, "Get the job done," without regard to race.

In mid-1950, the Army finally agreed to abolish its racial quota, and the Navy gave petty officer status to stewards. At the same time the President's committee pointed to the outstanding success in 1949 of the integration program in the US Air Force, where blacks had clearly demonstrated their ability.

By 1952, integration had been completed in the Air Force and the last segregated unit had been deactivated. ■

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