

Document 220

President's Committee on Civil Rights

**A PROGRAM**  
for  
**MORE EQUALITY**



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## DISCRIMINATION IN THE ARMED FORCES

In the fight for freedom, members of our largest minority group did not realize for themselves the liberation which they helped accomplish abroad. For them the Armed Forces did no more than mirror the stereotyped prejudices which infest our civilian society. Service in the Army or Navy was at first viewed with great hope by the Negro community. This promise was, however, not realized, not only because of official military policy but also because the white soldiers and sailors carried with them, for lack of proper indoctrination among other reasons, all the petty superstitions and fallacies traditionally held about the colored race.

At the outset, it was only after strong pressure from Negro leaders that acceptance of Negroes became official policy. After acceptance into the Armed Forces, segregation was applied almost without exception in all branches of the services. As one leading Negro authority has pointed out, his race desires, above all, integration in our culture. That this could not be accomplished or even furthered during the war was due in great part to the official policy of segregation.

Negroes were not only segregated on an individual basis into separate units but, upon assignment of the unit to duty, these units were again the objects of discrimination. For example, an unusually large proportion of such units were assigned to the Engineering Corps in the Army where, within that group, they did the greatest share of the common labor work. This allocation of the common labor and service type of work was not confined to the Army; it followed through in the Navy as well. Even in the case of colored WACS, this sort of discrimination was clearly evident and is typified by the famous court-

martial case at Fort Devens, Massachusetts where colored WACS refused to sweep floors and perform other menial tasks while whites of the same military rank customarily performed more palatable work. Although the case was eventually dismissed as to these girls, there is no evidence that the basic practices were discontinued.

Official orders against segregation were largely failures because of poor timing or enforcement. In one case an order against segregation in recreational facilities came after little "Harlems" had already been established with separate theatres for colored troops. Although white soldiers sometimes attempted to discourage segregation off Army grounds this too failed. In one such case, a Negro was killed in an altercation arising out of just such an attempt and his killer went unpunished.

The completely unprejudiced and wholesome attitude of the English people in accepting colored troops into their midst represents a startling contrast. In



NEGRO SOLDIERS FACE JIM CROW

this country, Negro soldiers were forced to abide by Jim Crow laws, put up with race riots, and face unprovoked violence. The records are replete with stories like the one in Elizabethtown, Kentucky. On July 9, 1945 three Negro members of the WACS were set upon and beaten by civilian policemen for the violation of a law which was later discovered to be non-existent.

Colored troops were welcomed in British-controlled Ireland, in England and also in Australia on the same basis as other American troops, and at first were treated with full social courtesies. This action aroused the anger of some white Americans, who at once sought to persuade the English, Irish and Australians to treat the colored Americans as social inferiors.

White Americans attempted in many instances to compel proprietors of public eating and amusement places to refuse to serve colored troops or to segregate them in some way. Arguments, and often fights, occurred on these occasions, with serious injuries sometimes resulting in death.

A number of small-scale riots took place between white and colored Americans in Ireland and England and several killings were reported. Some of the more dangerous conflicts arose over the attention paid to colored American soldiers by white native girls.

The inequities of the American court-martial system, even as applied to whites, were more sharply accented when applied to Negroes in a series of rape cases occurring in England. One case which attracted wide attention in the early summer of 1944 concerned Cpl. Leroy Henry, a Negro soldier. His death sentence on a charge of rape aroused the British press and people not only because of the severity

of the penalty but also because of grave doubts as to the validity of the charge. Americans were openly accused of importing their prejudices into England. Without waiting for the formality of a review by board, General Eisenhower set the conviction aside.

The British people as a whole resented the attitude of the American white troops in their treatment of colored soldiers and the matter attained such proportions as to be brought up in the House of Commons. A member of Parliament urged Prime Minister Churchill to "make friendly representations to American military authorities, requesting them to instruct their men that the color bar is not a custom in Britain." Churchill was reported to have replied: "The question is certainly unfortunate and I am hopeful that without any action on my part the points of view of all concerned will be mutually understood and respected."

It is small wonder, therefore, that, immediately upon the conclusion of the War, many Negro soldiers reenlisted in the Army for the specific purpose of obtaining foreign duty particularly in Europe. Many letters were received by the Negro press in the United States from overseas, exclaiming about the new-found social freedom. The trend to reenlistment slowed down when assignments to the desired areas were discontinued. Negro authorities report that, despite the discriminations practiced in the Army, many Negro youths sought to enlist because they felt that the Army did serve some good purpose, regardless of the horrors of war. The advantages they recount are instruction in skilled trades, education, health and sanitary methods, and an otherwise unrealizable opportunity to travel. The greatest complaint of the Negro community is, however, that returning Negro veterans are not being given full oppor-

tunities to put into practice the skills and better living habits which they did learn in the Army.

Unless the Congress is satisfied that postwar Army personnel practices and policies provide adequate protection of minority rights, the recent action of the House of Representatives defeating a ban against discrimination in the Army Nurse Corps bill by a vote of 187 to 47 would not appear to be in accord with the principles endorsed by this Subcommittee.

It is recommended, therefore, that the Committee invite the several branches of the Armed Forces to submit reports on the treatment accorded minority groups with a view to the re-definition of their personnel policies and practices to bring them in harmony with the principles of civil liberties.



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