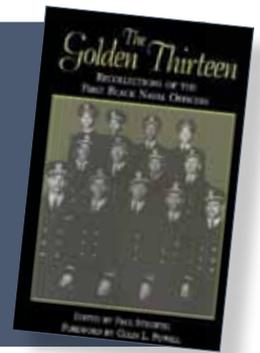


The Golden Thirteen

Recollections of the first black naval officers

Edited By Paul Stillwell

Book review provided by LT Candace Holmes, Region Legal Service Office Naval District Washington



The inevitability of World War II loomed over the United States in the early 1940s. At the same time, our country was also fighting another war: segregation. Unfortunately, this battle permeated the Navy as well. The Secretary of the Navy at that time, Frank Knox, was a major catalyst for the continued segregation within the Department of the Navy. Sure, there were many African American men serving in the Navy, about 100,000 in fact. However, none of them were officers. African Americans were forbidden from serving as officers due to a fear that integration would cause disruption among the officer community. This misguided fear was so deeply rooted in the Navy's core leadership that it took external pressure from several political and community-based organizations to influence the Navy leadership to take any action. Responding to this pressure, Adlai Stevenson, the assistant to the Secretary of the Navy, wrote a memo urging Secretary Knox to consider commissioning African Americans as officers in the Navy. In February of 1944, the Navy slowly opened its doors to African Americans to become commissioned officers. Some of those officers, later known as the Golden Thirteen, recounted their experiences in Paul Stillwell's book *The Golden Thirteen: Recollections of the First Black Naval Officers*.

One of the features I appreciated most about Mr. Stillwell's book is that he let the men tell their own stories through oral histories. It is clear that Stillwell took great care in the construction of the novel and made a significant effort to uphold the dignity of each individual's memory, despite the inevitable memory flaws that often accompany old age. Not only did Stillwell use the oral histories of each portrayed member, but he also consulted historians, archived documents and records that aided in painting a well-rounded portrait of each individual depicted. The author introduces each chapter with a short story about the personality and the character of each individual based on his interactions with them while preparing to write the book. Each chapter contains the recollections and pictures of one of the eight remaining members of the Golden Thirteen from childhood to most recent; highlighting not only their naval careers and the time they spent training at Camp Robert Smalls, but their various gains and achievements post-Navy as well. Stillwell's determination to produce an accurate account also led him to interview three of the white officers that either instructed during the officer

training course or served with the members of the Golden Thirteen, which provides for a well-balanced historical depiction.

In his introduction, Stillwell posits a plausible theory as to why the Navy decided to commission the first African American naval officers: the Navy was under political pressure to commission twelve African American officers. They decided to select 16 people with the rationale being that at least 25 percent of them would be unsuccessful. We later find out, however, that all sixteen men passed the course with a class average of 3.89. In the end, twelve men were chosen to become officers and one was made a warrant officer. The process by which these specific individuals were selected for commissioning is unknown to this day, even to the members of the Golden Thirteen; however, each one of them were recognized as leaders while enlisted and demonstrated leadership early on in their youth.

The author does an excellent job of chronicling each officer's training as they experienced it. The sixteen chosen individuals reported to Great Lakes Naval Station in Chicago for officer training at Camp Robert Smalls. The men provide mixed opinions concerning their treatment at Camp Robert Smalls during their crash course in officer training. Some said they felt the treatment was deliberately harsh and intentionally difficult; others thought the instructors were fair. By including the stories from the three white officers who either served with or taught them at Camp Robert Smalls, Stillwell offers a third perspective and allows the readers to come to their own conclusions. Regardless of what happened at Camp Robert Smalls, the men decided early on that they were there for a reason and whatever that reason was, they were determined not to fail and they vowed "sink or swim together," staying up late at night drilling each other on the subjects until everyone knew the material.

To say that the transition for the members of the Golden Thirteen as officers in the Navy was a smooth one would be misleading. They did suffer a few instances of prejudice after becoming officers. One member, Mr. Graham Martin, tells the story of how he and his wife went to Chicago to eat at a downtown restaurant and laxatives were put into their food. Other officers, like Mr. Samuel Barnes, recall meeting a few hostilities within the naval community like not being welcomed in the Officer's Club or



Sailors crossing the street in order to avoid saluting. Most of their white counterparts were able to look past the color of their skin and respect the men as officers once they got a chance to know them, see them as human beings, and build that foundation of trust and mutual respect.

The most amazing aspect of the book was that despite being assigned to menial jobs and assignments upon their commissioning (even though they were qualified enough to be deck officers) these officers worked hard, took their assignments with pride, and were successful in whatever assignment they were given; whether working as junior officers of the day, personnel officers, instructors, or tugboat drivers. They were proud to be officers and proud to be in the Navy. Additionally, they continued go above and beyond the call of duty as they became invaluable mentors and role models for the African American Sailors in the service. In fact, many of them continued to serve their country after they got out by working alongside the Navy to recruit more African American Sailors and officers in the service.

As somewhat of a bonus feature, Stillwell includes an interesting recollection about the destroyer escort, *USS Mason* (DE-529), the largest ship to have an African American enlisted crew during World War II, told through the eyes of the retired Reserve Commanding Officer Norman H. Meyer, and James E. Hair, his first lieutenant and another member of the Golden Thirteen. In his chapter, Meyer recounts his high expectations of his crew and proudly noted that they worked hard to meet his standards and that they were “as capable as their white counterparts in any destroyer escort.”

One thing is made clear from a reading of this book; the members of the Golden Thirteen took extreme pride in serving their country as naval officers. Leadership skills developed in the Navy certainly transferred to civilian life as each member became successful in their own right. Stillwell made a great decision in highlighting the individuals’ accomplishments before and after the Navy, proving that they were able to overcome the racial and prejudicial obstacles they each faced in their individual lives and take on such roles as a professional engineer, a social worker, a teacher, an attorney, an administra-

tor with a doctorate, an Urban League official, the first African American department head in the city government of Dayton, Ohio, the first African American member of the National Collegiate Athletic Association, and a justice of a state appellate court.

The book concludes with a chapter discussing the “Legacy of the Thirteen.” Here, Stillwell discusses the lasting impact that the Golden Thirteen had on the Navy. After the commissioning of the Golden Thirteen, the opportunities within the Navy for African Americans increased. Soon, other changes were made, like desegregating military housing and eradicating antiquated naval policies that required African Americans be assigned only to certain types of vessels and shore assignments. Though only one member of the Golden Thirteen, Dennis Nelson, stayed in the Navy for a full career, each one of these members had an enormous impact on the Navy.

Although the last member of the Golden Thirteen, Frank Sublett, Jr., died in 2006, the memories of those determined and proud individuals live on through this book and through the many officers who came after them. Many of us are able to succeed in the Navy today because they and many other brave men and women paved the way and set a standard each of us can aspire to meet. Through the courage, persistence, and commitment of the Golden Thirteen and their successors, doors have been opened.

Today, as recruits of all ethnicities and all races enter the “Golden Thirteen” in-processing building, the first thing they see is a photo of the officers. That building serves as a constant reminder of how far this Navy has come. And even though we have yet more work to do, these courageous men and the sacrifices they made serve as a lesson that there is no limit to how far this Navy can go when we are all given a chance to be successful. I was genuinely moved by this book and the recollections contained therein; it has inspired and motivated me to be not just the best officer I can be, but the best individual I can be both in and outside the Navy, and I am confident that it will have the same impact on anyone else who reads it. I wholeheartedly recommend this book.



The sixteen chosen individuals during an inspection at Camp Robert Smalls at Great Lakes Naval Station in Chicago.

Read any great books lately? Submit your book review to natalie.morehouse@navy.mil.