

0. RACIAL PREJUDICE IN THE NAVY - Story Preface

1. HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

**2. RACIAL PREJUDICE IN THE NAVY**

3. AN IMPOSSIBLE DREAM

4. DEEP SEA DIVING LEGENDS

5. MYSTERIES OF THE DEEP

6. MIXED-GAS DIVING

7. MID-AIR COLLISION

8. U.S. NAVY SALVAGE

9. OUT OF BLOOD AND GAS

10. BREAKING THE RULES

11. AMPUTEE DIVER

12. MASTER DIVER

13. REMINISCENCES OF CARL BRASHEAR



All branches of the U.S. military were segregated until after WWII. This image, from the U.S. National Archives, depicts a photo taken on April 13, 1942, by Private First Class Victor Tampone. "An MP [military policeman] on motorcycle stands ready to answer all calls around his area. Columbus, Georgia." As noted by the sign, "his area" had limitations.

The United States Armed Forces, including the Navy, had a long history of racial discrimination against African-Americans when Carl Brashear joined the Navy in February of 1948. Examine some of the evidence from countless examples contained in the National Archives.

- After WWI was over, the War Department in Washington, D.C. favored "Colored men for the Army only as members of labor units, or 'pioneer regiments.'"
- When states (such as Ohio) asked the War Department for approval to create segregated black military National Guard units (while legal segregation was the law of the land), the War Department agreed - as long as the units were "pioneer units." Citizens in Ohio objected to the demeaning status, insisting the proposal would merely create a black "clean-up battalion."
- Even when black labor units were formed, they were usually commanded by white men. When African-Americans were in command, they were governed by "Jim Crow" laws.

Returning black heroes of war wanted their pictures taken in uniform. Some were turned away by whites who operated photography shops. One soldier, wearing a medal for bravery, was told:

*We don't take pictures of Colored people.*

Military racial segregation and discrimination continued throughout World War II, but it worsened just after the War:

- In 1947, only 19.21 percent of the Navy's regular black personnel were assigned outside the Steward's Branch.
- Even the Navy itself was embarrassed that eight out of every ten African-American men in the Navy trained and worked separately from white sailors.

- With little hope of advancement, men in the Steward's Branch performed menial tasks and were led by noncommissioned officers.

Carl Brashear enlisted at the Navy's "statistical low point." Beginning his naval career as a steward just after the war, he went to segregated Key West where he worked in the Officers' Mess.

At the time, blacks could only patronize shops on one street in the town. But it was also in Key West where Carl Brashear met Chief Boatswain's Mate Guy P. Johnson who arranged for Carl to get out of the Steward Branch.

In his new job as beachmaster, Carl began his life-long love affair with the sea.

See [Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:](http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/RACIAL-PREJUDICE-IN-THE-NAVY-Men-of-Honor-Story-of-Carl-Brashear)

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## Questions 2 Ponder

### When Racism Demeans, What Is a Good Response?

African-American soldiers, returning home from WWI service in Europe, had medals for bravery. One soldier requested a photo of himself, wearing his medal, but was told: "We Don't Take Pictures of Colored People."

Elsewhere, after WWI, states (like Ohio) wanted to create segregated National Guard units (while Jim Crow laws still applied throughout America the units had to be segregated). The War Department, based in Washington, D.C., approved the request as long as the African Americans served in a "pioneer regiment."

What were pioneer regiments? They were labor units. Ohio citizens feared that if their state created such a National Guard unit, it would turn out to be a "clean-up battalion."

If American states—like Ohio—objected to the demeaning status imposed on African-Americans by the federal government, before and during WWII, could the states do anything to create change? If not, why not?

How would you respond if someone refused to take your picture because you were not of the same color or gender as the photographer?

When the government imposes restrictions on people, are we nevertheless free to help those individuals succeed—like Guy Johnson helped Carl Brashear?

When laws are unfair, or immoral, is it possible to follow the law but still do what is morally right?

## Media Stream



### Assigned Menial Tasks Only

Image online, courtesy the U.S. National Archives. 80-G-K-15541.

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