

Black Officers in the U.S. Navy

GRADES 6-8



Overview

This activity is geared toward participants in grades 6-8. The estimated amount of time to deliver this lesson is 45 minutes.

Black sailors have served in the U.S. Navy since its inception, but could only become officers as recently as World War II. The first group of Black officers was later known as the “Golden Thirteen,” and many have followed in their footsteps. However, many Black officers have had to navigate the challenging racial politics of commanding white subordinates.

Participants will use the story of the Golden Thirteen and oral histories to explore the experiences of Black officers in the U.S. Navy.



Objective

Participants will be able to evaluate the way that racism in the Navy created a unique position for Black officers working with white peers and commanding Black subordinates.



Materials

- Golden Thirteen photos
- Oral history compilation of Louis Ivey and Tommy Grant



Inquiry

Distribute or display photos of the Golden Thirteen to participants. Ask participants to share their observations.

- Who do you see in these photos?
- What role do you think these people play in the Navy?
- When do you think these photos were taken?

Provide background information on the Golden Thirteen. Discuss the following questions:

- What is the significance of the nickname “Golden Thirteen?”
- Can you think of any problems that might arise with Black sailors being promoted to officer status during the 1940s?



Investigation

Provide background information on the history of Black sailors serving as officers in the Navy. Then, listen to or read [oral history](#) transcripts from Louis Ivey and Tommy Grant. Discuss the following questions:

- What was similar about Louis and Tommy’s experiences?
- How did race impact Louis and Tommy’s abilities to be successful officers?
- What did it mean to these men to be officers in the Navy? Why was it important to them?
- What did it mean to Black enlisted men to serve under a Black officer?
- Why is it important to have diversity in leadership?



Activity

Re-Do

Share oral history transcripts with participants. In Tommy Grant’s oral history, he tells a story about being asked by a superior officer to tell him about one of his subordinates. Grant could only tell the officer about the man’s work ethic and job in the Navy. The officer told Grant that he needed

to know *everything* about his subordinates: their family life, hobbies and interests out of the Navy. Grant says that “something clicked,” and he decided then that he would get to know all of his men from then on out. He says, “I took time with every one who came in the division, and talked to them like they were men.” Ask participants to respond to the following question:

- Think about a time when you interacted with someone or a group of people and you were not as kind or respectful as you could have been. If you could go back and re-do the interaction, what would you do instead?

Extension: Female Officers in the Navy

Share oral history transcripts with participants and provide background information on Black officers and female officers in the Navy. Discuss this information with participants and pose the following questions:

- Why did it take so long for women to become officers in the Navy?
- What do you think it was like for the first women who were put in a position of authority over men? What challenges might they have faced?
- What similarities exist between Louis and Tommy’s experiences and what female officers may have experienced?

Lesson Connection

For more content on Black sailors moving out of the steward role, see our lesson: **On Board USS *Mason*.**

Background

The Golden Thirteen

By late 1943, there were over 100,000 Black sailors in the Navy. However, none of them were officers. Until June 1942, Black sailors could only serve in the Messman Branch, serving officers and cleaning staterooms. In that year, the Navy permitted Black recruits to enlist in the General Service. However, many Black sailors continued to serve as stewards, which was the only job

available to Black sailors on combat ships. Many other Black personnel are assigned to work in shore facilities as laborers.

As the war progressed, the Navy faced increasing pressure to accept Black officers. In January 1944, the Navy chose sixteen Black enlisted men for a segregated officer's training course at the Great Lakes training station in Illinois. The Navy compressed what was normally a 16-week training course into just 8 weeks, but the men still had the highest average on their final exams of any class in history.

Despite all 16 passing the course, the Navy chose only 12 men to become officers, and one to be a chief warrant officer. The other three went back to the enlisted ranks without explanation. The thirteen men selected were commissioned into the Navy Reserve and became the "Golden Thirteen," a nickname given to them by Captain Edward Sechrest in the 1970s when the group had their first reunion.

After the Thirteen

Although the Golden Thirteen marked a big change in Navy policy, it would take time until Black sailors were a significant presence in the officer corps. Harriet Ida Pickens and Frances Wills became the first Black female officers in the Navy when they were commissioned into the WAVES in 1944. The first Black sailor to be commissioned into the regular Navy (not the reserves) was Ensign John Wesley Lee Jr. in 1947.

In 1949, Black sailors began to graduate from the U.S. Naval Academy, the first being Ensign Wesley Brown. The first Black commander of a ship was Samuel L. Gravely Jr., who became the commanding officer of the destroyer *USS Theodore E. Chandler* in 1961. When Admiral Elmo Zumwalt became Chief of Naval Operations in 1970, he put a special emphasis on recruiting Black sailors into the officer corps. Although these changes were taking place throughout the twentieth century, it was still challenging for Black sailors to make their way into the officer corps, and often even more challenging to earn the respect of their white subordinates.

Female Officers in the Navy

Women were granted officer status in the Navy as early as 1942, although they had been serving formally since 1908. The earliest female officers were part of the Navy Nurse Corps and the WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service) during World War II. In 1944, the Navy Nurse Corps was designated full military rank. In both of these cases, women worked only among other women.

In 1948, women were allowed to serve in the regular Navy and Navy Reserve on a permanent basis, but they could not serve on combat ships. There were also limits on the number of women who could be in each rating. In 1972, Admiral Zumwalt released a Z-gram titled, "Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women," which slowly led to training groups being combined, women being permitted to remain in the service while pregnant, and eventually being allowed to serve on combat ships.



Additional Resources/References

For more information on the Golden Thirteen:

<https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/nhnc/browse-by-topic/diversity/african-americans/golden-thirteen.html#arbor>



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Documents and Images



The twelve commissioned officers of the Golden Thirteen

Credit: National Archives and Records Administration



The Golden Thirteen in 1944

Credit: Naval History and Heritage Command