JOSEPH JENKINS

By Diane Reeder

A PATRIOT WITHOUT PEER
In February 1944, the U.S. Navy commissioned its first African-American officers: a group who came to be known as the “Golden Thirteen.” This long-hoped-for action represented a major step forward in the status of African Americans in the military and in society as a whole.

But these gentlemen were not the first of their race to serve as American naval officers. Detroiter Joseph Jenkins of the Coast Guard preceded them by a year.

Joseph Charles Jenkins was a native Detroiter who earned a B.S. in civil engineering from the University of Michigan in the 1930s, a time when few African Americans were in attendance. During his schooling at Michigan, he was initiated into Sigma Rho Tau, an honor society for public speaking, and into Alpha Phi Alpha, the nation’s first black Greek-letter fraternity.

After graduation, Jenkins became a highway design engineer for the state of Michigan, overseeing the construction of the Detroit Crosstown Superhighway (what Michiganders know today as I-94) as well as the Willow Run Industrial Expressway. Jenkins continued working for the state while he earned a graduate business administration degree from Wayne State University.

In the late 1930s, as tensions rose between countries in Asia and Europe, Jenkins anticipated that America might be drawn into some conflict, somewhere. Drawing on his education and his leadership abilities, he helped organize what would become the 1279th Combat Engineer Battalion of the Michigan National Guard. It was a racially segregated unit, as the law required.

Segregation in the Ranks

Despite the fact that blacks had served in all prior wars in which America had engaged, none had been allowed to rise to the level of a naval officer. (A biracial man named Michael Healy held the rank of captain in the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service during and after the Civil War, but he identified himself as white.)

In the period prior to U.S. involvement in World War II, there were fewer than 4,000 African-American men in the U.S. Navy. Virtually all served as stewards, doing menial jobs such as cooking and cleaning. (Working as a steward was not a choice; in 1922, Navy regulations mandated that all black enlistees or re-enlistees join the stewards’ branch.)

Stewards were not in a position to command other sailors, and the new Navy Secretary Frank Knox, appointed in 1940 by President Franklin Roosevelt, was content to keep it that way. Some of the most powerful Navy staff had convinced Knox that blacks would be “incapable of maintaining discipline.” President Roosevelt differed in his opinion. He believed that African Americans should be allowed to enlist into general service, while still maintaining racial segregation. He also recommended that the establishment of “good Negro bands” could help white enlistees become more accepting of African-American colleagues.

The directors of the National Urban League and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, T. Arnold Hill and Walter White, also weighed in on the subject, highlighting the hypocrisy of African Americans fighting for democracy abroad while being denied their rights at home. As an essayist in The Crisis magazine put it, “the hysterical cries of the preachers of democracy for Europe leave us cold. We want democracy in Alabama, Arkansas, in Mississippi and Michigan, in the District of Columbia and in the Senate of the united States.” The black press embarked on what it called its “Double V” campaign: victories over Jim Crow as well as European fascism.

Roosevelt’s position won out with the help of this active African-American constituency. The case for blacks serving in positions of responsibility was further strengthened by the actions of African-American Navy cook Dorie Miller,
who assisted his mortally wounded captain and then manned an anti-aircraft machine gun in defense of his battleship during the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

A Seismic Shift in Policy

In 1942, Navy Rear Admiral Charles Snyder recommended admitting African Americans into the musicians’ and aviation branches as well as “on auxiliary ships, transports and other smaller vessels.” His colleague, Major General Thomas Holcomb, objected vociferously in this note: “If we are defeated we must not close our eyes to the fact that once in they [African Americans] will be strengthened in their effort to force themselves into every activity we have. If they are not satisfied to be messmen, they will not be satisfied to go into the construction or labor battalions.”

Holcomb continued, citing the danger of an educated black elite: “Don’t forget the colleges are turning out a large number of well-educated Negroes. I don’t know how long we will be able to keep them out of the V-7 [officers’] class. I think not very long.”

His fears were realized, perhaps sooner than he thought. Knox’s special assistant, Adlai Stevenson II, who would later run for president, was a primary persuader. According to the U.S. Army Center of Military History, Stevenson “was particularly effective in getting Negroes commissioned… . The Navy could not and should not, he warned, postpone much longer the creation of some black officers. Suspicion of discrimination was one reason the Navy was failing to get the best qualified Negroes, and Stevenson believed it wise to act quickly. He recommended that the Navy commission ten or twelve Negroes from among ‘top notch
services just as we procure white officers’ and a few from the ranks. The commissioning should be treated as a matter of course without any special publicity. The news, he added wryly, would get out soon enough.”

On April 7, 1942, Knox announced that the Navy would accept 277 African-American volunteers each week for general service.

It was under these challenging conditions that, on June 15, Joseph Jenkins enlisted in the U.S. Coast Guard. (After the war began, the Coast Guard was merged operationally with the Navy.) He started as a boatswain’s mate first class and was quickly promoted to chief. His first assignment was to recruit other African Americans in Detroit for the armed forces.

Four months later, he applied for admission into the USCG Reserve Officer Training Course (predecessor of the Officer Candidate School). He was recommended by Howard University Dean of Engineering Lewis Downing and U.S. Senator Prentiss Brown, who both agreed that Jenkins would make an excellent officer. His Coast Guard supervisor, H.O. Nielsen, also said of Jenkins that he “displays keen judgment and leadership in handling the public and in other problems…[and] appears to be ideally suited for officer material…”

On April 14, 1943, Jenkins completed training and was commissioned an ensign—the first African-American naval officer in U.S. history.

**Service on the Sea Cloud**

USCG Lieutenant Commander Carlton Skinner gave Jenkins his first on-board opportunity. Dismayed by the military’s practice of keeping ship crews segregated, Skinner had long proposed that giving African-American and white sailors equality on board would make the operation run smoother. And he used his command of the weather ship USS Sea Cloud to prove his point.

Jenkins was one of three African-American officers to earn a spot on this historic vessel: the first in the Navy’s employ to be integrated at all ranks. In addition to its scientific mission, the Sea Cloud cruised the North Atlantic on convoy duty, and even encountered combat. Armed with “four twin-mount 40-caliber and eight 20-caliber machine guns, two 3” 50-caliber guns, depth charges, K-Guns, and ahead-throwing anti-submarine weapons,” the Sea Cloud assisted in the sinking of a German submarine.

Jenkins served as the Sea Cloud’s navigation officer and earned a promotion to lieutenant junior grade. He was later tapped by Skinner to serve with him on the Navy’s second integrated vessel, the USS Hoquiam, which operated in the Aleutian Islands.

After the war’s conclusion, Jenkins maintained his ties with the military, receiving a commission as captain in the Michigan National Guard. He also returned to his work at the state highway department, rising to the position of assistant district engineer for the Detroit area.

His 22-year career with the state was cut short by a kidney condition, which caused his premature death on July 28, 1959. He was survived by his wife, Hertha; two sons, Joseph Jr. and Paul; and a daughter, also named Hertha.

Joseph Charles Jenkins, a patriot without peer in the black community, is buried at Evergreen Cemetery in Detroit.

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