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AFRICAN AMERICAN SAILORS: THEIR ROLE IN HELPING THE UNION TO WIN THE CIVIL WAR

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Since the very beginning of American history, African Americans have served alongside their white counterparts in virtually every major armed conflict on the high seas. This was especially true during the Civil War. The Union Navy continued to experience a shortage of available manpower to sufficiently man its fleet of 600 plus ships. Life aboard naval vessels was particularly harsh and naval recruiters did not hesitate to enlist African Americans.

The African American sailor saw his service as an opportunity to rise above the status of social discrimination and segregation. Because of the shortage of able-bodied seamen in the Union Navy, African Americans were encouraged to join the naval service at a time when the Army and Marine Corps excluded their service. The Union Navy could not have achieved its mission without nearly one-fifth of its total manpower, the African American sailor. Their numbers provided the credible force required to execute the strategic aims of the Anaconda Plan and helped to ensure a Union victory. The service of African American sailors allowed the North to end the war much sooner than it would have without their service, thus preventing an even greater number of loss to human life.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Title: African American Sailors: Their Role In Helping The Union To Win The Civil War

Author: Major Don A. Mills, Sr., United States Marine Corps

Thesis: The Union Navy played a decisive role in allowing the United States to achieve its strategic objective of preserving the Union; this goal would not have been realized without the manpower and contributions of African American sailors who served during the Civil War.

Discussion: Since the very beginning of American history, African Americans have served alongside their white counterparts in virtually every major armed conflict on the high seas. This was especially true during the Civil War. The Union Navy continued to experience a shortage of available manpower to sufficiently man its fleet of 600 plus ships. Life aboard naval vessels was particularly harsh and naval recruiters did not hesitate to enlist African Americans, free and slave, to ensure sufficient manning.

African American sailors saw their service as an opportunity to rise above the status of social discrimination and segregation. Because of the shortage of able-bodied seamen in the Union Navy, African Americans were encouraged to join the naval service at a time when the Army and Marine Corps excluded their service. In an effort to attract African American recruits and to have them reenlist when their terms expired, the Navy tended to treat African American sailors with some degree of equality and respect once at sea. African American sailors were messed and quartered alongside their white counterparts. Per the leadership of the ship's captain, segregation and discrimination were regulated or was less prevalent than in 19th century America.

The accomplishments of the Union Navy had a significant impact on its winning the war. The Union Navy could not have achieved its mission without nearly one-fifth of its total manpower, the African American sailor. Their numbers provided the credible force required to execute the strategic aims of the Anaconda Plan and helped to ensure a Union victory. The service of African American sailors allowed the North to end the war much sooner than it would have without their service, thus preventing an even greater number of loss to human life.

DISCLAIMER

THE OPINIONS AND CONCLUSIONS EXPRESSED HEREIN ARE THOSE OF THE INDIVIDUAL STUDENT AUTHOR AND DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT THE VIEWS OF EITHER THE MARINE CORPS COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE OR ANY OTHER GOVERNMENTAL AGENCY. REFERENCES TO THIS STUDY SHOULD INCLUDE THE FOREGOING STATEMENT.

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INTRODUCTION

In a letter written in August 1863, President Abraham Lincoln expressed his gratitude to the Union soldiers and sailors who had, under the leadership of Major General Ulysses S. Grant and Rear Admiral David D. Porter, lay siege and captured Vicksburg, Mississippi. "The Father of Waters again goes unvexed to the sea," Lincoln said of the Mississippi River. He gave thanks to the Army, then the Navy: "Nor must Uncle Sam' s Web-feet be forgotten. At all the watery margins they have been present. Not only on the deep sea, the broad bay, and the rapid river, but also up the narrow muddy bayou, and wherever the ground was a little damp, they have been, and made their tracks."[1]

History has generally forgotten about or ignored "Uncle Sam's Web-feet." This is especially true for those "Web-feet" of African American ancestry. Much diligence and persistence is required in order to find material written about them. It has taken many years to determine their actual numbers and the role they played in the naval service during the Civil War. In 1902, Secretary of the Navy, John D. Long, was asked about the service of African Americans in the Union Navy.[2] Senior officers who had served in the conflict recalled that approximately one-quarter of the enlisted force was African American. The secretary's office concluded that 29,511 African Americans had served; this was accomplished by taking the known figure of Civil War enlistments (118,044) and dividing by four.[3] That figure remained essentially unchallenged until 1973, when David L. Valuska's dissertation revised it downward

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[1] James M. McPherson and Patricia R. McPherson, *Lamson of the Gettysburg: The Civil War Letters of Lieutenant Roswell H. Lamson, U.S. Navy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), ix; James R. Arnold, *Grant Wins the War: Decision at Vicksburg* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1997), 314.

[2] Throughout this work, the terms African American, Black, Colored, Freedmen, Contraband and Negro are terms used to describe the people of African ancestry that were slaves or descendants of slaves in the United States.

[3] Herbert Aptheker, "The Negro in the Union Navy," Vol. XXXII. *The Journal of Negro History* (Washington, D.C., United Publishing Corp., 1947), 179.

to slightly less than ten thousand men, based upon his survey of surviving enlistment records. [4] Over the past decade, a research partnership among Howard University, the Department of the Navy, and the National Park Service has made possible an examination of a fuller array of records than earlier researchers, working as individuals, were able to explore. As a result, nearly 18,000 men of African descent (and 11 women) who served in the U.S. Navy during the Civil War have been identified by name. At 20 percent of the Navy's total enlisted force, African American sailors comprised a significant portion of the Navy's workforce.[5]

A study of the numbers show African Americans were vital to the Navy. The Union Navy required their numbers to man the ships, execute a blockade of more than 3,500 miles, and conduct combined operations with the Army against Confederate forces. African Americans were eager to prove their patriotism; they found a Navy that needed and more readily accepted them in their ranks than did the Army. This opportunity enabled African Americans both slave and free to play an important role in helping the Union to win the Civil War.

[4] Joseph P. Reidy, "Black Men in Navy Blue During the Civil War," *Prologue: Quarterly of the National Archives and Records Administration*, Vol. XXXIII, No. 3 (Fall 2001), URL: <http://www.nara.gov/publications/prologue/reidy1.html>, accessed 7 April 2002.
[5] Reidy, *Prologue*, accessed 7 April 2002.

Chapter 1

BACKGROUND

African American sailors have served proudly in the defense of our nation since before the American Revolutionary War. Researcher Elizabeth Arnett Fields highlights one important reason why the Navy accepted African Americans within its ranks. Since their earliest arrival in America, "free [African Americans] had chosen seafaring as a way of life, serving either on merchant ships or with the Royal Navy. In addition, slaves belonging to ship's captains frequently served on board with their masters."[6] This tradition provided the framework for African Americans to become familiar with life at sea. A second reason was by sheer necessity; the Navy had to continuously increase its manpower strength as new ships were built. African American sailors chose sea life over the land because life at sea offered a greater opportunity for advancement, better pay, and greater security from being captured or placed in bondage.[7]

From the Navy's inception, African Americans served, usually in the lowest positions such as cooks, coal heavers, firemen, gunners, powder boys, and stewards. In the state navies, they served in more prominent positions of authority such as seamen, coxswains, quartermasters, Marines and even pilots of naval vessels. Privateers received the most number of African Americans mainly because these ships were privately owned and manned. A ship's captain of a merchant vessel was also less likely to ask probing questions about the status of his crew, as long as they served well. In addition, the financial rewards for work on a privateer were far greater

[6] Elizabeth Arnett Fields, "African American Soldiers Before the Civil War," *A Historic Context for the African-American Military Experience*, report, Steven D. Smith and James A. Ziegler, eds. (U.S. Army Construction Engineering Research Laboratories, July 1998) URL: < https://www.denix.osd.mil/denix/Public/ES-Programs/Conservation/Legacy/ AAME/aame1.html>, accessed 19 February 2002.
[7] Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1961), 86-93.

than the pay received on land or in the Navy. The privateer crews were awarded a greater percentage of prize money for seizing enemy vessels, which in most cases, would be divided equally among them. Captains especially desired former slaves as sailors because "when conditions became intolerable, white sailors frequently abandoned ship; [former] slaves, on the other hand, did not have that alternative."[8]

The Navy's tradition of acceptance and employment of African Americans made recruitment of them a very viable option. African Americans readily responded to the opportunity for better than average employment and were integrated in the naval forces from the very beginning; there were no segregated ships comprised of an all African American crew. African Americans and their white contemporaries worked alongside one another while sailing on the coastal waterways. On some ships "[t]here seemed to be an entire absence of prejudice against [African Americans] as messmates among the crew."[9] While the Navy banned the enlistment of slaves, it readily accepted African American "Freedmen" to serve aboard ship.

In 1792, Congress passed the Militia Act, which required states to enroll all white men between the ages of 18 and 45 into military service. The Army's interpretation of the Militia Act prevented African American soldiers from serving until the summer of 1862.[10] Navy leadership however, interpreted the Militia Act quite differently. Even after 1840, when official naval regulations limited the number of African Americans to 5 percent of the total enlisted force, the regulation was not enforced.

[8] Fields, "African American Soldiers Before the Civil War," accessed 19 February 2002.
[9] Aptheker, "The Negro in the Union Navy," 170-171.
[10] The Army followed strict interpretation of the language within the Militia Act of 1792, "each and every free able-bodied white male citizen of the respective States" as opposed to the Navy who continued to enlist freed African Americans into its ranks.

In distinct contrast to the open-handed recruitment policy of the Navy, the Army and Marine Corps regarded enlistments of African Americans in a very different light. Service in the Marine Corps would prove to be the most difficult among the three. When Congress reestablished a separate Marine Corps on July 11, 1798, the new Commandant, Major William Ward Burrows, provided explicit instructions on the subject of African Americans entering the Marine Corps to his recruiting officers. In a letter to Lieutenant John Hall at Charleston, South Carolina, Burrows wrote:

> You may enlist as many Drummers and Fifers as possible, I do not care what [c]ountry the D & Fifers are of but you must be careful not to enlist more [f]oreigners than as one to three natives. You can make use of [African Americans] and Mulattoes [sic] while you recruit, but you cannot enlist them.[11]

Burrows' policy virtually erased nearly a century and a half of potential military service by African Americans who desired to serve within the Marine Corps. Burrow's policy of excluding African Americans would stand until 1942.

These distinct, prevailing attitudes and traditions were highlighted when the Civil War erupted in 1861. No African American would serve in the Marine Corps, and the Army would be slow to opening its recruiting doors, then only in the form of segregated units. The Navy however, would start the war with several hundred African Americans already serving aboard its ships while actively seeking more. The continued recruitment of African Americans would be a vital necessity for the Navy in order to meet the manpower requirements to fight the war.[12] In addition, the initial reluctance by President Lincoln to arm African Americans would indirectly benefit the Navy.

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[11] Henry I. Shaw, Jr. and Ralph W. Donnelly, *Blacks in the Marine Corps*, History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U. S. Marine Corps, Monograph (Washington, DC: GPO, 1975), ix-x. URL: <http://www.mcu.usmc.mil/ftw/files/black.txt >, accessed 17 February 2002.

[12] Fields, "African American Soldiers Before the Civil War," accessed 19 February 2002.

Chapter 2

ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND THE GREAT QUESTION

The question of arming African Americans to fight for the North was a very tough issue that President Lincoln had to skillfully address during his first two years in office. At the outbreak of the war, abolitionists and African American leaders such as Frederick Douglass tried to pressure Lincoln for the immediate acceptance of African American volunteers. Douglass stated, "Let the black man get upon his person the brass letters U.S.; … and there is no power on the earth which can deny that he has earned the right to citizenship." Douglass and many others viewed military service "as proof of his [African American] loyalty and as a brief for his claim to full citizenship."[13] However, Douglass and others soon discovered that Lincoln did not want their services at that time nor did he contemplate using them in the future.[14]

Lincoln supported leaving African American volunteers out of the war; the President and many of his subordinates held to the certainty that the war would not last long. In fact, he initially called for seventy-five thousand volunteers for a short ninety-day enlistment. Lincoln felt it was not necessary to recruit African Americans. He equally feared that to do so in 1861 would push the slaveholding border states (Maryland, Kentucky, Delaware, and Missouri) into the Confederate camp. Lincoln was quoted as stating: "My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and it is not either to save or destroy slavery."[15] He also said, "To arm the

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[13] Burghardt Turner, *Forward* in Arthur E. Barbeau and Florette Henri, *The Unknown Soldiers: African-American Troops In World War I* (New York: Da Capo Press, Inc., 1996), xviii-xix.
[14] L. D. Reddick, "The Negro Policy of the United States Army," *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. XXXIV, No. 1 (January 1949): 14-15.
[15] Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the Civil War* (New York: Da Capo Press, Inc., 1989), 160.

Negro would put 50,000 bayonets that are for us, against us."[16] Nothing shows this attitude more clearly than Lincoln's response to African American volunteers who crowded recruiting stations, eager for a chance to fight for the Union and for their freedom. The Lincoln administration thanked the volunteers and sent them home with an understanding that this war was a "white man's war."[17]

Other political leaders of the day reinforced similar feelings to Lincoln. Governor David Tod of Ohio warned, "this is a white man's government; that the white men are able to defend and protect it; and that to enlist a Negro soldier would be to drive every white man out of the service?"[18] An overwhelming number of northern whites at all levels of society did not see African Americans as equals and therefore, were unwilling to sacrifice their lives in the name of slavery, and simply resented the notion of having to fight alongside them.

Resentment of African Americans in the Union Army also reflected the general population of northern society early in the war. The height of this resentment was expressed in the Draft Riots of July 11-13, 1863 in New York City when a mob of about 50,000 people, mostly Irish immigrants, terrorized the city, lynching and beating African Americans. An African American church and orphanage were burned to the ground. An estimated two-dozen to nearly 100 people were killed.[19] These sentiments generally made it more difficult for sympathetic northern leaders to support the arming of African Americans. Most Union soldiers simply refused to fight side-by-side with African Americans. "We think we are a too superior

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[16] Henry Steele Commager, ed., *The Civil War Archive: The History of the Civil War in Documents* (New York: Black Dog & Leventhal Publishers, Inc., 2000), 542.
[17] Lerone Bennett, Jr., *Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America*, 6th rev. ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 190-191.
[18] Michael Lee Lanning, *The African-American Soldier: From Crispus Attucks to Colin Powell* (Secaucus, N.J.: Birch Lane Press Books, 1997), 34-35.
[19] Patricia L. Faust, ed., *The Civil War Society's "Encyclopedia of the Civil War"* (New York: Wings Press, 1997), 207.

race for that" explained one northerner. Even Lieutenant General William T. Sherman felt it "unjust to the brave [white] soldiers and volunteers" to place them on an equal basis with African Americans.[20]

Lincoln's attitude about arming African American did slowly evolve as the war progressed. The decisive defeat of Union forces at the Battle of Bull Run, Virginia, on July 21, 1861, and subsequent Confederate victories helped to make the issue that much more complicated. It moved the war from one of just preserving the Union to include the abolishment of slavery by the Fall of 1862. Also, there was a tremendous amount of pressure from the abolitionists, the press (particularly Horace Greely of the *New York Tribune)*, and Frederick Douglass as the war progressed. "Colored men were good enough to fight under Washington, but they are not good enough to fight under McClellan."[21]

Ultimately, the decision by Lincoln to use African American volunteers would not be universally popular and little motivated by idealism, but rather by the reality of a long and costly civil war. Historian Bruce Catton wrote:

> The decision to use the Negro … did not necessarily grow out of any broad humanitarian resolve; it seems to have come more largely of the dawning realization that, since the Confederates were going to kill a great man more Union soldiers before the war was over, a good many white men would escape death if a considerable percentage of those soldiers were colored.[22]

This dawning realization did not come suddenly to other members of Lincoln's staff, especially in the War Department. Simon Cameron, Secretary of War had early on made it clear that he

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[20] Keith Krawczynski and Steven D. Smith, "African Americans in the Civil War" in *A Historic Context for the African American Military Experience*, Report, Steven D. Smith and James A. Ziegler, eds. (U.S. Army Construction Engineering Research Laboratories, July 1998), URL: < https://www.denix.osd.mil/denix/Public/ES-Programs/Conservation/Legacy/ AAME/aame1.html>, accessed 19 February 2002.
[21] Lanning, *The African-American Soldier*, 35, 39.
[22] Bruce Catton, *This Hallowed Ground: The Story of the Union Side of the Civil War* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., 1936), 222.

would on principle refuse to accept African American volunteers. "This Department has no intention at present to call into service of the Government any colored soldiers." However, by January 1862, Cameron's stout opposition had changed. In an appeal to the rising tide of anti-slavery sentiment, Cameron's yearly report called for freed slaves to be armed and used against the Confederacy. President Lincoln was opposed to this policy and ordered Cameron to remove the offending passage. When he refused, he was removed from office. Lincoln's early opposition to African American soldiers would serve as a roadblock for the Army's recruiting efforts until the fall of 1862.[23]

Even as African Americans were being denied service in the Union Army ranks, the Union Navy opened its doors wide; this was in keeping with its policies of previous conflicts. Navy recruiters could not afford to refuse the enlistments of free African Americans, but the Army recruiters could initially because they had little trouble filling their ranks. White volunteers flocked to Army recruiting stations in large numbers. The Navy on the other hand, found it harder and harder to recruit white sailors to man its decks at a time when new ships were being built daily to strengthen the fleet for the blockade; it had to rely once again on the manpower of African Americans to fill its ranks. Such a move was more agreeable to the general population because arming sailors for sea duty was viewed quite differently than arming soldiers for battle on land.

The discriminatory perception by the white population and the patriotism of African Americans would serve as a force multiplier to help the Navy move forward in reaching its

[23] James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988), 563; Lanning, *The African-American Soldier*, 34. After taking office, Stanton was convinced that the war would soon be over and closed down the government recruiting offices in the spring of 1862. When he realized his mistake, he finally advocated the recruitment of African Americans to President Lincoln.

required manpower numbers. Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles, eager to secure and maintain African American manpower would make the most of the opportunity presented to him by President Lincoln and the Army's stiff handed approach to minority recruitment.

Chapter 3

ENLISTMENTS

The Civil War North was not a utopia for African Americans, free or slave. Dr. John S. Rock, a physician, attorney, and prominent leader of the African American community and abolitionist movement in Boston during the Civil War wrote:

> The present position of the colored man is a trying one; trying because the whole nation seems to have entered into a conspiracy to crush him. But few seem to comprehend our position in the free States. The masses seem to think that we are oppressed only in the South. This is a mistake; we are oppressed everywhere in this slavery-cursed land.[24]

Rock's comments revealed that while technically free, northern African Americans were viewed as second-class citizens. Existing laws throughout the North confined them to segregated railway cars, stagecoaches, churches, schools, prisons, hospitals, and even cemeteries. Their status in the North excluded them from most decent paying jobs. Menial, low-paying jobs such as waiters, barbers, mariners, porters, and cooks were the norm with little chance of upward mobility or higher standard of living.[25] In spite of the discriminating treatment they faced in the North, African Americans were still willing to serve in the Navy to gain a better chance at improving their lives economically, socially, and militarily.

African Americans enlisted in the Union Navy in large numbers. Congress had officially sanctioned the recruitment of Freedmen in 1839. This policy made it easier for free African Americans to enlist in the Navy than in the Army. The Army did not immediately accept African American recruits due to official regulations that were based on their earlier

[24] James M. McPherson, *The Negro's Civil War* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1965), 252.
[25] Krawczynski, "African Americans in the Civil War," accessed 19 February 2002.

interpretation of the Militia Act of 1792. The monthly enlistments for white sailors became even more difficult as wartime demands increased. The Navy had to resort to cash incentives in 1864 in order to encourage people to join. Recruiting posters, which offered bonuses for sailors, advertised up to 12 months of service with a large emphasis on prize money for the crews. (See Figure 1).[26] A sailor's term of enlistment varied from six months, or the duration of a cruise or operation, up to three years or the end of the war. No standard enlistment policy existed in the Navy.[27] Recruitment of whites was still low because most northerners believed that the war would be over in a matter of months and that a two or three year enlistment was just too long to endure the harsh conditions of Navy living. Freedmen on the other hand, would prove to be one the best sources of personnel for the Navy's recruiting efforts.

Seafaring had become a way of life for many African American sailors who were barred initially from joining the Union Army. Joining the Navy had become the only way to get into the fight for freedom against the Confederate States. Even fugitive slaves were allowed to enlist in the Navy in 1861 well before African American soldiers were allowed to enlist. The Army's reluctance resulted in the fugitives flocking in large numbers to naval vessels at a time when their manpower was needed most.

As word passed throughout the South that Union naval vessels were taking on African Americans as "contraband" and providing safe havens from the Confederates, navy commanders soon found themselves overwhelmed with thousands of former slaves willing to risk their lives to cross over to fight for the North.[28] In copies of reports dated July 15 and 17, 1861, Commander Oliver S. Glisson, of the *Mount Vernon*, patrolling Virginia waters informed his

[26] Donald L. Canney, *Lincoln's Navy* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1998), 118-120.
[27] William N. Still, Jr., John M. Taylor, and Norman C. Delaney, *Raiders & Blockaders: The American Civil War Afloat* (Washington: Brassey's, Inc., 1998), 57.
[28] Contraband-An escaped slave during the Civil War who fled to or was taken behind Union lines.

THE CONSCRIPT BILL!

HOW TO AVOID IT!!

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1,000 MEN WANTED, FOR 12 MONTHS!

Seamen's Pay, - - - - - - -	$18.00	per month.
Ordinary Seamen's Pay, ...	14.00	" "
Landsmen's Pay, ...	12.00	" "

$1.50 extra per month to all, Grog Money.

$50,000,000 PRIZES!

Already captured, a large share of which is awarded to Ships Crews. The laws for the distributing of Prize money carefully protects the rights of all the captors.

PETTY OFFICERS,—PROMOTION.—Seamen have a chance for promotion to the offices of Master at Arms, Boatswain's Mates, Quarter Gunners, Captain of Tops, Forecastle, Holds, After-Guard, &c.

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CHANCES FOR WARRANTS, BOUNTIES AND MEDALS OF HONOR.—All those who distinguish themselves in battle or by extraordinary heroism, may be promoted to forward Warrant Officers or Acting Masters' Mates,—and upon their promotion receive a guaranty of $100, with a medal of honor from their country.

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An incentive on a recruiting station poster in Salem, Massachusetts listed the following, "$50,000,000 PRIZES! Already captured, a large share of which is awarded to Ships Crews. The laws for the distributing of Prize money carefully protects the rights of all the captures" in efforts to influence enlistees to join the Navy vice the Army. Despite these efforts, naval enlistments never met overall personnel needs during the war, though the enlistment of African Americans contributed tremendously toward the overall manpower deficiency.

Figure 1: Navy Recruiting Poster of 1862?[29]

[29] Canney, *Lincoln's Navy*, 119.

superior that contraband was arriving daily.[30] He soon discovered that though they refused to leave when instructed, they did in most cases provide valuable information and were capable of performing useful work. Reports went up the chain of command via Admiral Silas Stringham who commanded the Atlantic Blockade Squadron. Stringham sent the reports to Gideon Welles, Secretary of the Navy, adding his opinion that, "if [African Americans] are to be used in this contest, I have no hesitation in saying they should be used to preserve the Government, and not to destroy it." Admiral Stringham began to close his remarks by asking the question, "These men are destitute; shall I ration them?" He then suggested, "They may be serviceable on board our storeships."[31]

Secretary Welles promptly replied:

> Sir: Your dispatch No. 70, in relation to certain Negroes who have fled from Virginia and are on board the *Mount Vernon*, asking what disposition shall be made of them, is received.
>
> It is not the policy of the Government to invite or encourage this class of desertions, and yet, under the circumstances, no other course than that pursued by Commander Glisson could be adopted without violating every principle of humanity.
>
> To return them would be impolitic as well as cruel, and, as you remark, "they may be made serviceable on board our storeships," you will do well to employ them.
>
> I am, respectfully, your obedient servant,
>
> Gideon Welles[32]

Former slaves continued to appear in large numbers and report after report to Secretary Welles continued through August and September of 1861:

> … a small open boat [with five African Americans in it] came alongside mine demanding food and protection… discovered an open

[30] U.S. Naval War Records Office, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*, Ser. 1, Vol. VI (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1894-1922), 8-9. Hereafter referred to as {ORN}. (Unless otherwise noted, all references to {ORN} are from Series 1).
[31] Stringham to Welles, July 18, 1861, {ORN}, VI, 8-9.
[32] Welles to Stringham, July 22, 1861, {ORN}, VI, 10.

> boat, containing four Negroes, with a white flag flying on the staff, and pulling for the ship. I took them on board; found them intelligent; they gave me useful information; and one of them informed me he had been as pilot to the steam tug…. We now have sixteen Negroes on board this vessel; who are consuming our provisions and water faster than I think desirable… four fine-looking Negroes, contraband of war have just arrived….[33]

In response to the large numbers of contraband slaves arriving daily to board naval vessels, the Secretary of the Navy finally issued the following order to Admiral Goldsborough regarding the enlistment of contrabands in the United States Navy:

> Sir: The Department finds it necessary to adopt a regulation with respect to the large and increasing number of persons of color, commonly known as contraband, now subsisted at the navy yard and on board ships of war.
>
> These can neither be expelled from the service to which they have resorted, nor can they be maintained unemployed, and it is not proper that they should be compelled to render necessary and regular services without a stated compensation. You are therefore authorized, when their services can be made useful, to enlist them for the naval service, under the same forms and regulations as apply to other enlistments. They will be allowed, however, no higher rating than "boys," at a compensation of $10 per month and one ration a day. I am, respectfully, your obedient servant,
>
> Gideon Welles[34]

African Americans, slave and free, were now officially authorized to enlist in the Union Navy by official order of the Secretary of the Navy. Advancement and payment instruction limits were clearly stated by the Secretary, but very seldom were they strictly adhered to. As the demands of the Navy continued to increase to meet the needs of the war, so did official naval policy concerning African American sailors and their will to fight.

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[33] From reports of various officers, {ORN}, VI, 81, 85-86, 95, 107, 113-114.

[34] Morris J. MacGregor and Bernard C. Nalty, eds., "River Gunboats and Blockading Warships," in *Civil War and Emancipation*, Vol. II of *Blacks in the United States Armed Forces: Basic Documents* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, Inc, 1977), 178. Order of the Secretary of the Navy to Flag-Officer Goldsbourough, U.S. Navy, commanding Atlantic Blockading Squadron, regarding enlistment of contrabands. Navy Department, September 25, 1861.

Figure 2: The crew of the USS *Miami* (Courtesy, Naval Historical Center)

Enlistment centers within the coastal states provided the greatest number of African American recruits. Rear Admiral Samual Du Pont understood the importance of enlisting African Americans into the Navy in a remark to his wife, "Everybody wants contrabands…. I always say yes, if you can find them; plenty ashore is the answer."[35] States such as New York and Pennsylvania provided approximately 1,200 African American sailors; Massachusetts and New Jersey provided more than 400 who joined the Union Navy. Maryland with more than 2,300 names on file, provided the greatest number of recruits. More than 7,800 names are recorded from Confederate states with the largest number being from Virginia with more than

[35] Still, *Raiders & Blockaders: The American Civil War Afloat*, 56.

2,800. The fact that nearly 6,000 African American sailors came primarily from the Chesapeake Bay reflects that roughly 35 percent of the total number of African Americans came from this region.[36]

From 1862 through 1864, the naval rolls increased as the number of African American sailors continued to grow. Table 1 below shows how the percentage of African American sailors steadily increased from less than 5 percent to more than 23 percent through 1864. By September of 1865, most of the wartime volunteers had been discharged from the service. The numbers decreased proportionally to 15 percent of the total force. The number of African American sailors resident on the official records still showed an increase of minority naval manpower 3 times that of at the start of the war.

Table 1.
Aggregate Percentages of African American Enlisted Men Serving on Board U.S. Naval Vessels by Quarter of the Calendar Year, 1862-1865:

Quarter	Percentage
1st Quarter 1862	8%
2nd Quarter 1862 through 2nd Quarter 1863	15%
3rd Quarter 1863 through 3rd Quarter 1864	23%
4th Quarter 1864 through 3rd Quarter 1865	17%
4th Quarter 1865	15%

Source: Muster Rolls of Vessels, RG 24, National Archives.

[36] Reidy, *Prologue*, accessed 7 April 2002.

The Union Army became suspicious of the large numbers of African Americans who consistently sought to enlist in the Navy. An official army investigating commission reported in March, 1862 that:

> A considerable number [of African Americans] have taken service in the navy…. Service in the navy is decidedly popular with them. The navy rates them as boys; they get $10 a month, and are entitled to all the privileges of ships' crews, and besides, have absolute control of the earnings of their own labor, which must operate as a powerful incentive to prefer the sea to the land service, when in the latter only $2 per month is the amount they realize [after clothing and subsistence].[37]

African Americans who preferred serving their country on the high seas instead of the Army found it more of an incentive monetarily in one respect as the above report revealed.

The pay scale varied significantly between African Americans and whites. In 1862, a white enlisted sailor's pay rate ranged from $45 per month for a yeoman to $8 or $9 per month for a boy on a ship of the line. A white seaman (also rated as a coal heaver) earned $18, an ordinary seaman, $14. The landsman (equivalent to Seaman Third Class) rated $12 per month. Sea pay for the average sailor was low, even by the standards of the time, particularly so for the African American sailor whose pay was officially restricted to not more than $10 per month. The typical wages for civilian jobs however, were much higher ranging from $45 to $68 per month for the average white employee.[38] Aboard most ships, African Americans served as coal heavers, which drew more than double the pay they could get in the Army.[39] Overall, sailors were able to earn somewhat of a decent living and were treated more fairly, depending on their rank.

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[37] Aptheker, "The Negro in the Union Navy," 177.
[38] Canney, *Lincoln's Navy*, 121.
[39] Ivan Musicant, *Divided Waters: The Naval History of the Civil War* (New York: Castle Books, 1995), 57.

Chapter 4

THE BLOCKADE AND LIFE AT SEA

On April 19, 1861, President Lincoln issued a proclamation announcing the formation of a naval blockade on Southern ports, which stated:

> Now, therefore, I, Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States, with a view to the … protection of public peace and the lives and property of quiet and orderly citizens pursuing their lawful occupations… deem it advisable to set on foot a blockade of the ports with the [Southern] States aforesaid….[40]

Lincoln saw that a blockade would serve two important functions. The first was the ability to sharply reduce the South's access to foreign markets, making it more difficult for the Confederacy to sustain their war effort. The second was to demonstrate to foreign powers his resolve to crush the rebellion of the South.[41]

The idea of a naval blockade was first proposed by Lincoln's military advisor, Brevet (temporary rank given for valor) Lieutenant General Winfield Scott, Commanding General of the Union Army.[42] Scott believed that the majority of Southerners desired to maintain relationships with the United States. He therefore favored a three-part plan that would restore the Union with as little bloodshed as possible. Scott's plan meshed with President Lincoln's perception of the rebellion and original war aim, which was to preserve the Union. The primary strategy of Scott's plan was to create a complete naval blockade of the Southern states by cutting off the supply

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[40] Paul Calore, *Naval Campaigns of the Civil War* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2002), 62. This proclamation was issued two days after President Davis issued an appeal to privateers to make shipments on behalf of the Confederacy.

[41] Spencer C. Tucker, *A Short History of the Civil War at Sea* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 2002).

[42] Lieutenant General Winfield Scott led American forces in the decisive campaign of the Mexican War from the Vera Cruz landings to the capture of Mexico City in 1847. He received a brevet promotion to his current rank for his actions. He officially retired on November 1, 1861 due to health reasons. He suffered from gout and vertigo, weighed more than 300 pounds, and could no longer ride his horse at the age of 75. He was able to live long enough to see the results of the Anaconda Plan and the effects it had on the South. General Scott died May 29, 1866.

lines to the rest of the outside world so that they could not sell cotton and buy European goods and weapons in support of the war. A second objective of the plan was to divide the eastern and western Confederate states by regaining control of the Mississippi River and cutting off communications and access to the western (mostly Texas) cotton and food supplies. The third objective of the plan consisted of an attack on the Confederate capital of Richmond, Virginia in hopes that it would end the war by crushing the diplomatic center of the Confederacy. The plan was sound, but also very ambitious. It would require hundreds of ships and thousands of men to maintain a stranglehold strong enough to make a considerable difference in subduing the South. For the plan to effectively work, it was necessary to blockade more than 3,500

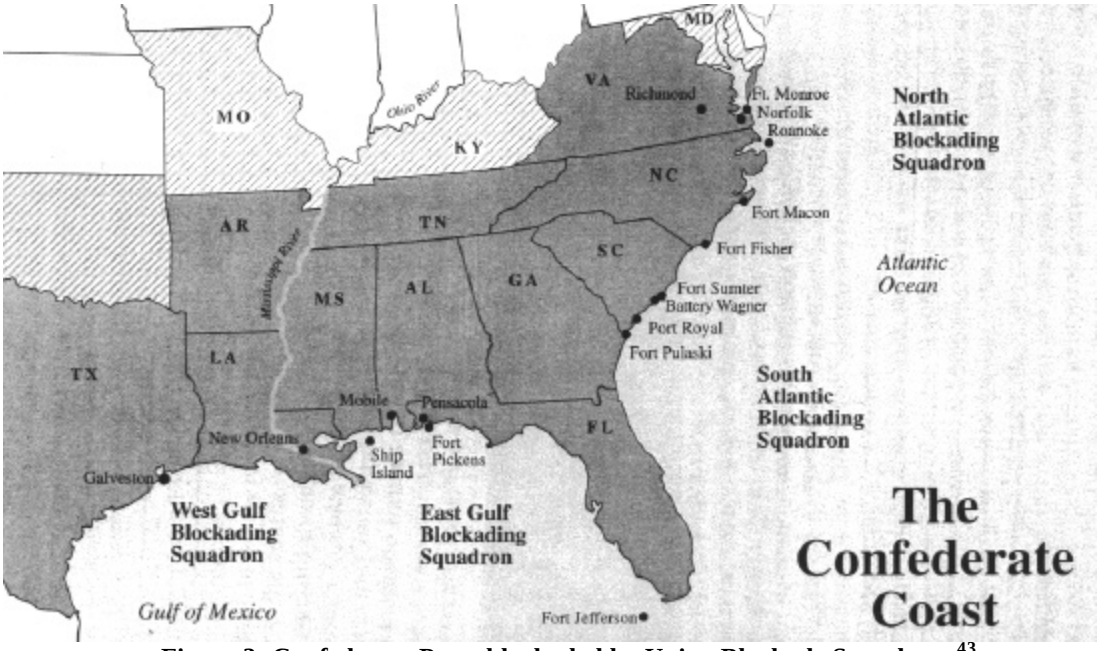

Figure 3: Confederate Ports blockaded by Union Blockade Squadrons[43]

miles of coast from Virginia to Mexico and up the Mississippi from New Orleans to New Madrid Bend, Missouri.[44] This plan would later become known as the Anaconda Plan, named after the snake which slowly crushes its victims over time.

[43] Tucker, *A Short History of the Civil War at Sea*, 13.

When General Scott retired on November 1, 1861, Secretary of the Navy Welles became responsible for creating and maintaining the blockade of the South in support of the Anaconda Plan. Initially, the Navy had 90 vessels, 42 of them were commissioned for active service, and only 24 of them were steamers in which to execute the plan. Under Welles' guidance, the Navy began the massive expansion of its fleet. The expansion grew rapidly, largely because of the North's manufacturing superiority. By December of 1861, the number of ships had grown to 264 and by December, 1864, the United States Navy maintained a force of over 671 ships which made it the second largest navy in the world behind Great Britain.[45] The continual growth of the Navy required a significant increase in the number of sailors needed to man these ships. As the Navy struggled to obtain white recruits, African American sailors would remain in high demand. A representative percentage of the number of African Americans serving in various blockade squadrons in support of the Anaconda Plan during the second quarter of 1864 is shown in Table 2.

As the Anaconda Plan began to take hold, hyperinflation became a significant factor in the South due to an increased shortage of food, guns, supplies and ammunition for the war effort. The effects of the blockade began to tighten farther as the blockade-runner capture rate increased to every 1 ship in 4 by 1863. In 1864, the capture rate climbed to 1 ship in 3 and in 1865, (when only several Gulf Ports remained open) the capture rate rose to 1 ship in 2. European countries such as England and France refused to become involved in the war from a political and legal aspect by declaring neutrality regarding the Union blockade. Their position indirectly benefited the North because the South depended heavily on foreign imports and the export of

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[44] "The Anaconda Plan," The Mariners' Museum, URL: <http://ww.mariner.org/monitor/02_navalst/anaconda_plan.html>, accessed 25 February 2002.

[45] Tucker, *A Short History of the Civil War at Sea*, 7.

Table 2.

Percentages of African American Enlisted Men Serving on Board U.S. Naval Vessels in Three Representative Squadrons, Second Quarter of 1864:

Squadron	Percentage
North Atlantic	25%
West Gulf	20%
Mississippi	23%

Source: Muster Rolls of Vessels, Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel, Record Group (RG) 24, National Archives.

cotton and other goods to sustain its economy. Europe had officially recognized the blockade and reduced the amount of imports into the South. The Confederates began to suffer tremendously financially.[46] The inability of the South to ship out large amounts of its principal cotton export meant that the Confederate government was deprived of its chief source of revenue. Taxes could not be paid and Confederate money was being reduced to worthless pieces of paper. The cost to feed a typical family in the South shows how drastic the situation was regarding the economic hardship the South was now facing. The depreciation and the shortage of essential goods meant that prices for goods had reached astronomically high levels.[47] (See Table 3).

Major General Ulysses S. Grant recorded the most prominent highlight of the Anaconda Plan with the siege of Vicksburg, Mississippi. Unable to penetrate the strong and determined defenses of Vicksburg, on 22 May, 1863, Grant and Rear Admiral David D.

[46] Stephen R. Wise, *Lifeline of the Confederacy: Blockade Running During the Civil War* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), 92.
[47] Tucker, *A Short History of the Civil War at Sea*, 14.

Table 3. [48]

Comparison of the Cost to Purchase Food Items in the South by 1863 as a Result of the Impact of the Anaconda Plan:

Pre-War Cost in 1860		**Cost During the Union Blockade in 1863**	
Bacon, 10 lbs. at 12 1/2c.	$1.25	Bacon, 10 lbs. at $1	$10.00
Flour, 30 lbs. at 5c.	$1.50	Flour, 30 lbs. at 12 1/2c.	$ 3.75
Sugar, 5 lbs. at 8c.	.40	Sugar, 5 lbs. at $1.15	$ 5.75
Coffee, 4 lbs. at 12 1/2c.	.50	Coffee, 4 lbs. at $5	$20.00
Tea (green), 1/2 lb. at $1	.50	Tea (green), 1/2 lb. at $16	$ 8.00
Lard, 4 lbs. at 12 1/2c.	.50	Lard, 4 lbs. at $1	$ 4.00
Butter, 3 lbs. at 25c.	.75	Butter, 3 lbs. at $1.75	$ 5.25
Meal, 1 pk. at 25c.	.25	Meal, 1 pk. at $1	$ 1.00
Candles, 2 lbs. at 15c.	.30	Candles, 2 lbs. at $1.25	$ 2.50
Soap, 5 lbs. at 10c.	.50	Soap, 5 lbs. at $1.10	$ 5.50
Pepper and salt (about)	.10	Pepper and salt (about)	$ 2.50
Total	$6.55	Total	$68.25

Porter devised a plan to cut all food and supplies going into the city. Admiral Porter provided 13 heavy naval guns from his squadron and the crews to man them. As noted earlier, approximately 23 percent of Porter's total manpower within his squadron consisted of African American sailors. Their service in the campaign supplied the bodies the Navy needed to conduct combined operations with the Army, which contributed significantly to the eventual surrender of Vicksburg by Lieutenant General John C. Pemberton on July 4, 1863. Grant and Porter's success won the Mississippi River and placed it back in Union hands. Giving praise to the Navy, Grant later remarked, "The navy … was all it could be, during the entire campaign. Without its assistance,

[48] John B. Jones, *A Rebel War Clerk's Diary*, Earl Schenck Miers, ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1958), 159.

the campaign could not have been successfully made with twice the number of men engaged. It could not have been made at all…."[49]

The strategy of exhaustion, relying "on the sure operation of a complete blockade" and "a powerful movement down the Mississippi" by an expedition of up to 20 steamboats and a 60,000-man army to "envelop the insurgent states and bring them to terms with less bloodshed than by any other plan" had prevailed and placed the North on the road to victory. [50] The Anaconda Plan had prevented the South from obtaining critical supplies and munitions needed to continue fighting in the war. The voluntary enlistments of many African American sailors made it possible for the North to achieve its strategic goal. With the required amount of naval manpower adequately provided, the taking of Vicksburg is considered by many to be the turning point of the war. Admiral Porter's Mississippi squadron played an important role in the victory at Vicksburg, a victory that helped split the Confederacy in half along the Mississippi River. Nearly a quarter of the total naval manpower, which consisted of African American sailors, cannot be overlooked when evaluating the success of this great battle.

In addition to the tedious task of blockade duty, life at sea was primarily tolerated under less than desirable circumstances. Crammed into close quarters alongside their white counterparts, eating meager rations and enduring the effects of weather and many other hardships, African American sailors performed their duties under tedious and sometimes difficult conditions.[51] During this time, the Navy did not segregate between African Americans and white servicemen. Noted scholar Herbert Aptheker describes the living conditions and the treatment of free African Americans aboard naval vessels, as well as the practice of discrimination and

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[49] Calore, *Naval Campaigns of the Civil War,* 180.
[50] Peter Maslowski, "To the Edge of Greatness: The United States, 1783-1865", *The Making of Strategy: Rulers, States, and War,* Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox, and Alvin Bernstein, eds. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 237.

segregation before 1861. He writes that very few instances of racial discrimination could be found in official records regarding the mistreatment of free African Americans. Aptheker notes that free African Americans were frequently superior in rank to their fellow white crewmembers. The Navy Department did not even distinguish whites from African Americans until the official enlistment of contraband slaves in 1861. [52]

Figure 3: The crew of the USS *Hunchback*, (NARA, NWDNS-111-B-2011)

With the enlistment of thousands of former slaves, a certain amount of discriminatory practices would eventually surface in the Union Navy. These practices prevailed and remained prevalent though it was much less than that which generally observed in the Union Army or in 19th century American civil society. Most regulations that limited the positions of African Americans were not eagerly enforced. Even contrabands were occasionally employed in tasks that normally required men having a higher rating; these jobs often received higher pay. Generally however, contrabands were given jobs of the lowest rank and in most cases, those jobs

[51] Calore, *Naval Campaigns of the Civil War,* 2.
[52] Aptheker, "The Negro in the Union Navy," 187.

were particularly laborious, unhealthy and dangerous work. The desire to be able to support a family and to live free from bondage, relatively safe from capture were incentives that reduced desertion among African Americans to a large degree as compared to their white counterparts.

Discrimination that did exist toward African Americans surprisingly originated from the officer ranks more so than from the enlisted crew. Some naval officers were apparently more prejudiced than others, Admiral David Dixon Porter was one such officer.[53] His use of the expression "niggers" and the distinction he drew between men and "darkies" in written communications to a superior officer served as evidence that prejudice was alive and well in some quarters of the Union officer ranks. He instructed that contrabands were to receive no more than $9 per month, an order issued after the Navy Department had announced a revised policy of enlisting them with ratings up to landsmen (who were paid $12 per month) and first class boys who were to receive $10 per month.[54] This would seem to have no other explanation than bigotry. As commander of the Mississippi squadron, Porter issued a general order instituting "Jim Crowism," strict segregation and a three-class system (officer, white enlisted men, & African American sailors) aboard ships in his charge.

In July 1863, he announced "owning to the increasing sickness in the squadron, and the scarcity of men, it becomes necessary for the efficiency of the vessels to use the contrabands to a greater extent than before." He went on to remark that white men, when performing strenuous labor under a Southern sun seemed most prone to disease, and that, therefore, African Americans only were to be used under such conditions, with "every precaution being taken to keep [whites]

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[53] "David Dixon Porter, Admiral, United States Navy," bio., URL: <http://www.arlingtoncemetery.com/ddporter.htm>, accessed 17 April 2002. Porter served as Acting Rear Admiral, Commander, Mississippi River Squadron in 1862. He was later commissioned as Rear Admiral. He took charge of the lower Mississippi River as far South as New Orleans in 1863. He also commanded the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron, 1864. He was promoted to full admiral in 1870.

from being taken sick." African Americans might be used "to defend the vessels" where required by personnel shortages. This policy, it was carefully explained, was "dictated by necessity," yet it was "believed that in cases of emergency the [African Americans would] make efficient men." Porter announced that contrabands might be promoted to all ranks except that of petty officers, first class firemen, and seamen. The last two exceptions were in direct violation of Navy Department policy. His order also remarked:

> Only clothes enough will be issued to them to make them comfortable until they are out of debt and in all cases they must be kept distinct from the rest of the crew. They can be stationed at guns when vacancies exist, to pass shots and powder, and handspikes, at train-tackles and side-tackles, pumps, and fire buckets; and can be exercised separately at great guns and small arms.[55]

Porter ended his statement by asserting that African Americans "are not naturally clean" and that therefore, "great attention will be necessary" on the part of the officers to make and keep them so. He remarked that, "[t]he policy of the government is to use the [African Americans], and every officer should do his utmost to carry this policy out." In November, 1964, as Rear Admiral in command of the North Atlantic Blockade Squadron, Porter instructed one of his Division commanders to "issue an order to all vessels of your command not to employ Negroes as lookout, as they are not fit to [be] entrusted with such important duty…."[56]

Additional evidence indicates that other naval officers exhibited similar prejudices. In some cases there seems to have been greater eagerness among them to prevent "Negros [sic] [from] committing excesses" than to wage war against the Confederates.[57] Racism did exist aboard naval vessels; the extent to which it was widely displayed aboard Union naval vessels

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[54] Porter to Foote, May 16, 1863, {ORN}, XXIV, 678.
[55] General Order No. 76, off Vicksburg, July 26, 1863, {ORN}, XXV, 327-328.
[56] Porter to Parker, Hampton Roads, November 24, 1864, {ORN}, XI, 90-91.

was nearly nonexistent in official naval records. Of the more than 600 Union ships serving during the war, attitudes such as Admiral Porter's could be considered isolated cases of blatant racism toward African Americans. Typically, African American sailors were considered as "able-bodied hands" not faces, the hands necessary to get the job done. "Their attitude toward authority, … and their expressive work-songs were shared across the color line" in helping to unify the ships' crews.[58] Life among the crew was seldom highlighted as an untenable issue. The real problem, when it did exist, lay with the attitudes of the officers in general and the ship's commanding officer in particular.

[57] The quoted words came from an order given to Lt. Collins by Flag Officer Du Pont, November 10, 1861, {ORN}, XII, 338.
[58] W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 216-217.

Chapter 5

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THEIR BRAVERY

War and the sounds of the cannons put racism on hold and pushed patriotism and valor to the forefront. Favorable comments on the behavior of individuals or groups of African Americans were numerous and in some cases officially recognized by superiors. The following are typical examples that support this finding. A senior naval officer, reporting a successful raid upon a Confederate steamer, praised the conduct of his junior officer and men and added: "I was compelled to include five colored men in the party, and they behaved admirably under fire."

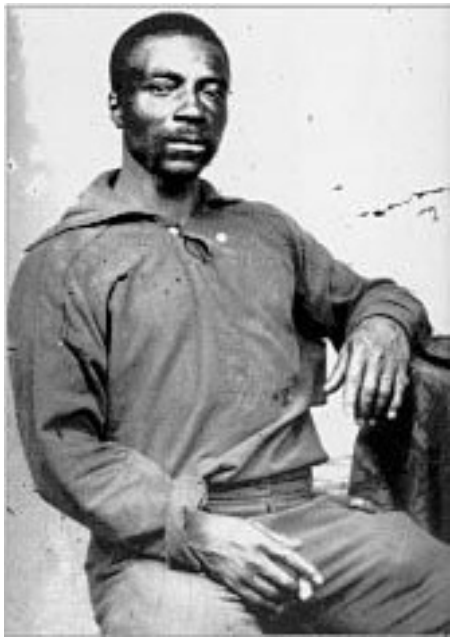

Figure 4: Civil War sailor George Commodore.
(National Archives Records Administration,
Records of the Veterans Administration, RG 15)

In another account, a daring adventure was recorded culminating in the kidnapping of a [Confederate] postman who carried official and personal mail headed for Charleston, South Carolina. A white petty officer, two enlisted contrabands, and a third African American who

later joined the Union fleet, completed this task. The petty officer was promoted to the rank of Acting Ensign, while Admiral Du Pont remarked, "The contrabands [never named] who went with him are also, I think, deserving of an advanced rating."[59]

In a fierce hand-to-hand encounter, that marked the surprise boarding and subsequent capture of the U.S.S. *Water Witch* in Ossabaw Sound, South Carolina, in June 1864, the lone survivor of the battle was a contraband by the name of Peter McIntosh. According to the report of Admiral J. A. Dahlgren to Secretary of the Navy Welles, McIntosh's escape and subsequent warnings that were given saved several other Federal vessels from capture. The surgeon of the *Water Witch* was captured and later released. He later reported that a landsman, Jeremiah Sills, "fought most desperately, and this while men who despised him were cowering near, with idle cutlasses in the rack jogging their elbows." Jeremiah Sills died in the battle.[60]

The use of contraband pilots was a commonly used practice by naval personnel. It is reported that a Rear Admiral wrote to the Secretary of the Navy, "I desire to add that I have also made use of the services of certain contraband pilots, and have authorized the payment to them sometimes of $30 and sometimes $40 per month. May I hope that this course meets with the approval of the Department? They are skillful and competent."[61]

The rating of pilot for African American sailors had not been approved by the Navy Department and was thus a violation of a direct order given by the Secretary of the Navy Welles. However, the skill and competence that these men displayed to their white counterparts could not be overlooked even by some of the highest-ranking officers in the naval service during the war.

[59] This event occurred in November, 1862. {ORN}, XIII, 430-433.
[60] Aptheker, "The Negro in the Union Navy," 192.
[61] Du Pont to Welles, June 10, 1863, {ORN}, XIV, 251.

Also pertinent is the remark of Brigadier General L. Thomas, the Union Army's Adjutant General to the Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton. In early 1863, the Army was considering the formation of African American artillery units. Thomas made the remark: "The experience of the Navy is that the [African Americans] handle heavy guns well."[62] His comment serves as evidence of the fact that the senior leadership began to take notice of the competence and accomplishments of African American sailors.

Eight African American sailors of the Union Navy served with such outstanding gallantry that they were recommended for the nation's most coveted military award, the Congressional Medal of Honor. At least seven African American sailors received this award. With one exception, Commander William G. Temple, of the U.S.S. *Pontoosuc*, recommended to Rear Admiral Porter that Clement Dees, an African American sailor of the rank of seaman, be awarded the Medal of Honor for "…gallantry, skill, and coolness in action…" during operations in and about Cape Fear River, which extended from December 24, 1864, to February 22, 1865, and which resulted in the capture of Fort Fisher and Wilmington. However, the official record of recipients of the Congressional Medal of Honor does not list Clement Dees.[63]

Aaron Anderson, an African American landsman of the *Wyandank*, was recommended for and awarded the Medal of Honor for bravery while serving with an expedition on Mattox Creek, Virginia, March 16-18, 1865. In a launch under acting Ensign Summers, whose "crew… were all [African American] but two" dispatched "with orders to clear that creek which [was done] most thoroughly; …."[64] The crew destroyed three schooners under a fire of musketry from

[62] Aptheker, "The Negro in the Union Navy," 192.
[63] Thomas Truxtun Mobes, *Black Soldiers-Black Sailors-Black Ink: Research Guide on African Americans in U.S. Military History, 1526-1900* (Williamsburg, VA: Mobes Publishing Co., 1994), 1313-1314. After extensive research it was determined that the medal was approved but not awarded to Dees due to desertion.
[64] Aptheker, "The Negro in the Union Navy," 193.

300 or 400 rebels, whose fire in a few moments "cut away half of the oars, pierc[ing] the launch in many places and cut[ting] the barrel off a musket being fired at the enemy."[65]

A second African American sailor to win the Medal of Honor was Landsman Robert Blake; the official Navy publication lists his rank only as "Contraband, USN." He was a member of the crew of the *Marblehead.* In a bitter engagement with Confederate batteries on John's Island, Stono River, South Carolina, Christmas Day, 1863, while "Serving the rifle gun, Blake, …carried out his duties bravely throughout the engagement which resulted in the enemy's abandonment of positions, leaving a caisson and one gun behind."[66]

Joachim Pease, an African American seaman aboard the *Kearsarge*, earned his Medal of Honor on June 19, 1864, in the historic encounter that resulted in the destruction of the Confederate raider, *Alabama*, of Cherbourg, France. Captain Winslow of the *Kearsarge*, in submitting Pease's name to the Secretary of the Navy for special attention, remarked that he had "exhibited marked coolness and good conduct." Pease's immediate superior officer, acting Master D. H. Sumner, reported to the ship's Executive Officer, the day after the battle that "…no one could be distinguished from another in courage or fortitude… among those showing still higher qualifications [was] Joachim Pease (colored seaman), loader of same [No. 1] gun. The conduct of the latter in battle fully sustained his reputation as one of the best men in the ship."[67]

John Lawson, an African American landsman aboard the flagship *Hartford*, in the battle of Mobile Bay, August 5, 1864, also earned the Medal of Honor. An excerpt from his citation reads Lawson was:

> Wounded in the leg and thrown violently against the side of the ship when an enemy shell killed or wounded the six-man crew at the shell

[65] U.S. Navy, Bureau of Naval Personnel, *Medal of Honor, 1861-1949: The Navy* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1950), 13.
[66] *Medal of Honor,* 15-16.
[67] Aptheker, "The Negro in the Union Navy," 194.

whip on the berth deck, LAWSON, upon regaining his composure, promptly returned to his station and, [*sic*] although urged to go below for treatment, steadfastly continued his duties throughout the remainder of the action.[68]

Figure 5: John H. Lawson, Landsman, USS *Hartford,* won the Medal of Honor for heroism during the Battle of Mobile Bay (National Archives Records Administration, 64-M-197.)

The examples above highlight the sense of dedication, commitment, and desire for freedom that many African Americans hoped to achieve during the Civil War. In the face of adversity and in most cases severe harm, they were willing to take the chance to achieve a better way of life. The roles portrayed by African American sailors during this time in our nation's history opened many doors for those who would assume their role. U.S. Naval intelligence benefited tremendously from the daring acts of African American men and women who were willing to risk their lives in order to preserve the Union in hopes for a better life.

[68] *Medal of Honor,* 34-35.

Individually, their bravery was typical of the sailors who served. Collectively, they indicated the patriotic fever that existed; they had strength for the fight. The records reflect that African Americans willingly did their fair share, acquitting themselves with honor in battle. Such efforts contributed mightily to the Union's strategic strategy for winning the war.

Chapter 7

CONCLUSION

The African American sailor played an essential part in the defense of our nation during the Civil War. There are many reasons why African American sailors fought in the Civil War. I have concentrated on answering three basic questions: (1) Why did African Americans choose the military as an alternative to slavery or menial, lower paying jobs in civilian society of the North; (2) Why did African Americans choose the Navy instead of the Army or Marine Corps when enlisting into military service; and (3) Did the additional manpower have a significant impact on the Navy's effort to execute the Anaconda Plan and help win the war?

Naval service proved to be more accommodating to African Americans by tradition and necessity. It provided a viable opportunity for African Americans to have a better life socially and economically. For men lacking in formal education, aboard ship they could learn a skilled trade, support their families, and in rare instances, possibly progress to the rank of petty officer. The opportunity to learn a skilled trade or to receive special training was a huge benefit for African Americans in the Navy. This was good because many of them had little to no education and often lacked the financial means to pursue higher learning. A naval tradition formed over the years as the Navy kept its doors open to able-bodied sailors willing to serve fully integrated into shipboard life. This tradition resulted in a familiarity with naval service that most African American sailors could identify with and learn to accept.

A comparable standard of living and quality of life could be seldom duplicated in civilian society. Naval service was the only alternative that African Americans had which would allow them the opportunity to be placed to some extent, on equal footing with their white counterparts. Although life aboard ship was harsh and unaccommodating, African Americans were integrated

into ship life and positions of authority in all but the officer ranks. Naval vessels provided a sense of security for former slaves and Freedmen, but most importantly better living conditions compared to bondage. Their Army counterparts constantly faced the possibility of being pulled into slavery or killed if captured on land by Confederates. In addition, the Union Army lost roughly one in every fifteen soldiers to disease, while the Navy lost only one in forty sailors. Combat death rates were one in nine for the Army but only one in sixty-five for the Navy.[69]

Although they were not afforded the basic liberties of the average U.S. citizen, African American sailors fought bravely in defense of the Union. Additionally, African Americans chose the Navy over the Army simply because the Army had officially shut its recruiting doors from 1792 until 1862. The Marine Corps, on the other hand, stood on the extreme end of the minority recruitment spectrum by not allowing African Americans to serve until June 1942 during World War II. Therefore, at the start of the Civil War the Navy was the only service in position to actively recruite African Americans.

The war at sea was important in deciding the outcome in favor of the Union. African American sailors helped the Union to exploit its naval and maritime advantage to turn the war on land to its advantage. African Americans provided the numbers required for the Anaconda Plan to blockage the Confederate coast, which kept the Confederacy from selling its cotton crops aboard and gaining money to finance its war effort. While some blockade-runners did get through, it became more difficult as the Navy's ships increased and the blockade became stronger.[70] Once the Union Navy controlled the coast, it had the capability to project land forces along the Confederate's 3,500 miles of coastline.

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[69] Tucker, *A Short History of the Civil War at Sea,* 8.

[70] McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom,* 382. The blockade-runners were built for speed, not capacity, and when pursued they sometime had to jettison their cargo.

In the interior waters along the Mississippi River, African American sailors comprised 23 percent of the crews. As part of Union naval and land forces working in combined operations, they were able to cut the Confederates in half. Grant and Porter's success in the Vicksburg campaign had a profound political and economic influence, as well as cutting off horses and supplies from the Trans-Mississippi West to the remainder of the Confederacy. The performance of the African American sailors and soldiers made Grant aware that their numbers could significantly influence the outcome of the war. He wrote Lincoln on August 23,1863, "I have given the subject of arming the Negro my hearty support. This, with the emancipation of the Negro, is the heavyist [sic] blow yet given to the Confederacy."[71] Their support role had helped to ensure Grant's victory, and freed-up Union troops badly needed by the Army of the Cumberland against General Braxton Bragg near Chattanooga.[72]

African American patriotism and the desire to serve provided the Navy with 20 percent of its total manpower. This was a significant number that undoubtedly helped to shorten the war. Without them, the blockade would have been less effective, and Confederate supply problems would have been less affected. Porter would have lacked the crews needed to move Grant's army below Vicksburg. If Vicksburg had remained opened, the North would have been denied access to the Mississippi for trading its goods. This would have also allowed the Confederacy to maintain a line of communication for the resources from the Trans-Mississippi West. A longer war might have invited foreign recognition for the Confederacy. Lastly, the Union Navy would have lacked the personnel required to execute the Anaconda Plan or tight blockade. Without the blockade, the Confederacy would not have eventually withered on the vine from hyperinflation

[71] Lanning, *The African-American Soldier,* 46-47.
[72] Calore, *Naval Campaigns of the Civil War,* 181.

and a shortage of goods. African American sailors helped to end the war sooner, and thereby saved lives. They paved the way for the principles and freedoms we enjoy today as citizens of the United States. They were Americans before all else, not only to save the Union but to break the bonds of slavery.

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