



# Pioneers of Ethnic Diversity in the American Sea Services

*Trained at the Academy, they broke barriers while serving their country*

by William H. Thiesen, Ph.D., Atlantic Area Historian, USCG

The United States Coast Guard has had a history of ethnic diversity that rivals most any other federal agency. African Americans have served in the United States Coast Guard over its entire 220-year history, but their participation in the service has been largely overlooked. So it is only fitting that we should document some of their contributions by starting at the Coast Guard Academy, which pioneered the role of African American officers in America's sea services.

The first African American officers in the service completed their training at the Academy; however, rather than enter as cadets, these men came through the Reserve Officer Training Course, forerunner of today's Officer Candidate School (OCS). The first of these unique individuals was Joseph Charles Jenkins, who was born in Detroit in 1914. Jenkins began working for the Michigan State Highway Department at a young age, which encouraged him to earn a civil engineering degree at the University of Michigan. He graduated in 1937 and, for the next five years, he continued to work for Michigan's highway department while undertaking graduate studies at Michigan State and University of Michigan, and completing a business administration degree through an extension program. Before joining the Coast Guard in 1942, he served as a highway design engineer for the highway department and oversaw the construction of the Detroit Crosstown Superhighway and the Willow Run Industrial Expressway.

On 15 June 1942, at the ripe age of twenty-eight, Jenkins enlisted in the service as a boatswain's mate first class and was promoted to chief within a month. During this time, he served as a recruiter for African American enlistees



*An early photograph of Joseph C. Jenkins in his officer's uniform*

in the Detroit area. By October, he applied for the service's Reserve Officer Training Course with recommendations from Michigan senator Prentiss Brown; State Highway Commissioner Donald Kelly; Lewis Downing, dean of Howard University's School of Engineering and Architecture; and H.O. Nielsen, his supervisor at the Detroit's Coast Guard recruiting office. In his recommendation letter, Nielsen wrote that Jenkins "displays keen judgment and leadership in handling the public and in other problems . . . [and] appears to be ideally suited for officer material and is so recommended."

Jenkins was accepted and completed the Academy-based program and received his commission as an ensign on 14 April 1943, becoming the first "recognized" African American naval

officer in U.S. history.\* By September of that year, Coast Guardsman Clarence Samuels received a direct commission from the enlisted ranks to become the second African American officer in the nation's sea services. U.S. Navy officials wishing to integrate their officer ranks as soon as possible bemoaned the fact that the Coast Guard had already done so; however, the navy managed to commission its first African American officers in 1944.

The second African American admitted to the Academy's Reserve Officer Training Course also had an interesting background. Born in 1918 in Louisville, Kentucky, Harvey Clarence Russell Jr., was an Eagle Scout and the son of a professor at Western Kentucky University. He received a four-year degree from Kentucky State University, where he lettered in football, and later undertook graduate studies at the University of Michigan and Indiana University. He began teaching at the high school level before completing his graduate coursework and then took a job machining Norden aviation bombsight parts for the war effort. Russell enlisted in the service as an apprentice seaman in December 1942 and became a coxswain within four months. The service recognized his potential as a teacher and assigned him as a signalman instructor to the Advanced Seamanship School at Coast Guard Training Station Manhattan Beach, located in New York City.

Russell began the Reserve Officer Training Course in September 1943, nine months after Jenkins. He received very high marks as a leader and was popular both on and off campus. He completed the training in February of 1944 and joined Jenkins and Clarence Samuels on board the Coast Guard-manned USS *Sea Cloud* (WPG-284), the nation's first integrated naval vessel. Newly promoted to lieutenant junior grade, Jenkins served as the cutter's navigation officer while Ensign Russell served as the training



*Harvey C. Russell Jr., Reserve Officer Training graduate, who commanded an integrated Coast Guard-manned U.S. Army fuel ship in World War II. (U.S. Coast Guard photo)*

officer. The two officers became close friends and were transferred to the Pacific to serve on the integrated Coast Guard-manned patrol frigate USS *Hoquiam* (PF-5). In October 1945, LTJG Russell assumed command of his own Coast Guard-manned vessel, the integrated U.S. Army fuel vessel TY-45. By 1945, Clarence Samuels had already commanded two Coast Guard vessels, so Russell became the second recognized African American in history to command an American sea service vessel.

The first African American to enter the Academy as a cadet was Jarvis Leon Wright Jr. He graduated seventh out of a senior class of 284 from Philadelphia's John Bartram High School and was one of three Bartram graduates to enter the Academy with the class of 1955. For two years, Wright competed with the Academy's track and cross-country teams and was well liked by his fellow cadets. However, in 1957, Wright experienced serious health problems, received medical treatment and had to resign his appointment. Academy superintendent, RADM Frank Leamy had to accept the resignation, stating, "I regret that Cadet



*Pioneer African American officers Joseph Jenkins and Clarence Samuels during a snowstorm on the deck of USS *Sea Cloud*, a Coast Guard-manned vessel and the nation's first integrated U.S. sea service ship. (U.S. Coast Guard photo)*

Wright must be separated from the Coast Guard. He has demonstrated the qualities of character, intelligence and interest that are desired in prospective Commissioned Officers of the Coast Guard."

The second African American cadet admitted to the Academy was Merle James Smith Jr. Smith's father, U.S. Army Colonel Merle J. Smith, served first in counterintelligence and then in ordnance, specializing in nuclear weapons. Merle Jr. attended schools in the U.S., Japan and Germany, where his high school guidance counselor recommended he apply to the Coast Guard Academy. His international experiences provided a thorough knowledge of history and politics, and he gained a solid understanding of foreign languages. In his final year of high school, Smith attended Aberdeen High School in Maryland, where he lettered in football and served as sports editor for the school newspaper.

When it came time to select an educational institution, Smith could choose from several military academies and colleges or universities. However, it was the warm reception from pro football legend and Academy football coach, Captain Otto Graham, which won over Smith. Smith entered the Academy in June of 1962, played football and lettered in the sport for the Academy. Unfortunately, he was sidelined by knee surgery in 1963, when the team enjoyed a perfect season and played Western Kentucky University in the Tangerine Bowl, considered one of the Academy's great achievements in team sports history. During his Academy years, Smith developed strong ties to the institution, cadets and staff, such as Graham, who admired the young man for recovering from his injuries to become a first team defensive end. In June 1966, Merle Smith completed a four-year Bachelor of Science degree, becoming the first African American cadet to graduate from the Academy.

Smith's first assignment out of the Academy was the 255-foot cutter *Minnetonka* (WHEC-67) on which he initially served as communications officer and, for the last six months, he served as the cutter's operations officer. After eighteen months on board the *Minnetonka*, he received command of the *Cape Wash* (WPB-95310) out of Monterey, California; and, two years later, was assigned to serve in Vietnam. There he commanded *Point Mast* (WPB-82316) and *Point Ellis* (WPB-82330) and directed more

than eighty naval fire support missions in Operation "Market Time." In one mission, Operation "Sea Lords," his cutter accounted for the destruction of ten enemy bunkers, four rocket launchers, thirteen structures, and nineteen sampans. The honors he received for service in Vietnam included the Bronze Star Medal with "V" device, Navy Meritorious Unit Citation, Presidential Unit Citation, and Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry. Smith became the first African American officer to command a federal vessel in combat and the first African



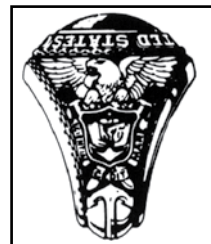
*J Jarvis L. Wright Jr., the first African American admitted for matriculation at the Coast Guard Academy. He started his academic career in 1955 and had to resign after two years due to serious health problems. (U.S. Coast Guard photo)*



*Merle J. Smith Jr., pictured with his father, Colonel Merle J. Smith, Sr. (U.S. Army), and Coast Guard Commandant Willard J. Smith at the Academy commencement, 1966. (U.S. Coast Guard photo)*

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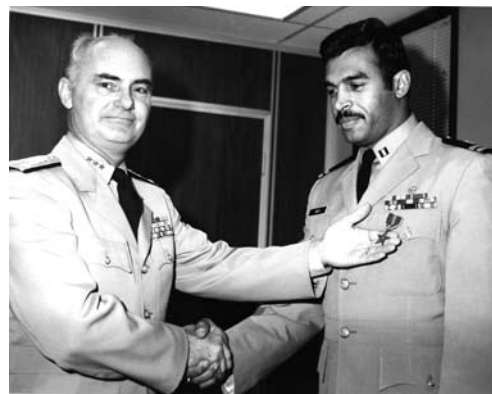
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American sea service officer to receive the Bronze Star Medal.

After returning from Vietnam, he served a number of years at Coast Guard headquarters in Washington, D.C. During this period, he spent two-and-a-half years on the international affairs staff, attended law school at George Washington University and served as deputy chief of the Coast Guard Military Justice Division. In 1975, Smith was assigned to the law faculty at the Academy, where he was reunited with his mentor Otto Graham, helped coach the Academy football teams and served as Class Advisor for the Class of 1977.

All of these men served with great merit in the Coast Guard and later in civilian life. In September 1945, LTJG Jenkins returned home to Detroit, where he became assistant director of metropolitan Detroit for the Michigan Highway Department. He also received a commission as captain in the Michigan National Guard's engineering corps and remained an active member of Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity, which he had joined the University of Michigan. In 1959, high blood pressure caused Jenkins's kidneys to fail and organ transplant surgery had not come into common practice. He died at the age of forty-four. LTJG Russell sent a letter to the Coast Guard personnel office after commanding his own vessel in the South Pacific. In it he wrote, "During the past four years, the Coast Guard has built up good will due to its race relations policies and is considered the most liberal of all the armed forces. It is for this reason that I feel I could be integrated into the regular service." However, for some unknown reason, Russell transferred to Reserve status in 1946 and returned to civilian life. Russell began working for the Pepsi Cola Company and, in 1962, he broke the corporate color barrier after becoming Vice President of Corporate Planning at Pepsi-Cola; and, in 1965, he became vice president of PepsiCo. After his time at the Academy, Jarvis Wright returned home, but little is known about him after he moved back to Philadelphia. In 1979, LCDR Merle Smith joined the Reserves and began a civilian career as legal counsel for the Connecticut-based submarine builder, General Dynamics Electric Boat Company. In addition,



Vice Admiral Thomas Sargent pins the Bronze Star Medal on Merle Smith for his service in Vietnam as a patrol boat commander in operations Market Time and Sea Lords. (U.S. Coast Guard photo)

Smith maintained his connection to the Academy by teaching law classes on a part-time basis.

During their time in the service, these men did not consider themselves pioneers of ethnic diversity at the Academy or in the U.S. military. Their primary concern was to serve their country and apply their military training like any other Coast Guardsman. While many men and women have followed in their path, these individuals were the first known African Americans to receive training at the Coast Guard Academy and they proved a great credit to their service and to their country.

*[\* Note: Some cite Captain Michael Healy, late-nineteenth century commander of the famous revenue cutter Bear, the first African American sea service officer in U.S. history. Son of a Caucasian father and African American mother, he could be considered African American by nineteenth-century and today's ethnic standards. Due to his light skin complexion, his peers and contemporaries did not realize he was African American. In addition, Captain Healy never disclosed his ethnic heritage to others. Therefore, Joseph Jenkins could be considered the first known or recognized African American officer in the United States sea services.]*

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*Dr. Thiesen received a Master's degree from East Carolina University's Program in Maritime History and earned a Ph.D. from University of Delaware's Hagley Program in the History of Technology and Industrialization. His research interests include Coast Guard history, naval history, ship design and construction, and the history of technology.*