

# Minorities at NAS Corpus Christi During World War II

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## Changing the Military Culture

On June 25, 1941, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 8802 stating, "It is the policy of the United States to encourage full participation in the national defense program by all citizens of the United States, regardless of race, creed, color, or national origin, in the firm belief that the democratic way of life within the Nation can be defended successfully only with the help and support of all groups within its borders."<sup>1</sup> Even with the directive to diversify the military, Secretary of the Navy, Frank Knox disagreed that integration would be accepted by the current enlisted and officer personnel at that time. It was determined through a General Board, established by Knox to determine how to conduct the integration, the only acceptable jobs for minorities would be mess hall attendants, servers, and other menial jobs. "Of the 26,000 black Sailors, some 18,000, or roughly two-thirds, were messmen, 6,000 or not quite one-quarter, were in the general service, and the remaining 2,000 served in the naval construction battalion as Seabees."<sup>2</sup>

African Americans sent to serve in the Seabees had their own struggles. The Bureau of Docks had many missteps in the road to fair treatment of those men. For more information see Naval History and Heritage Command on this topic at <https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/museums/seabee/explore/online-reading-room/historic-topics0/WWII-Black-seabees.html>.

With the death of Knox in April 1944, James Forrestal was appointed as the Secretary of the Navy. Forrestal had a different view of segregation in the Navy. "The Negroes resent the fact that they are not assigned to general service billets," he declared, "and white personnel resent the fact that Negroes have been given less hazardous assignments ashore."<sup>2</sup> Forrestal directed the Bureau of Naval Personnel to select 25 ships to be served by black crews; a decision that resulted in success.

Though changes were being implemented by the new Secretary, they did not trickle down to NAS Corpus Christi prior to the end of the war. There were no African American cadets or Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES) at the Naval Air Station Corpus Christi during World War II, only Sailors. Although most of these men served as mess stewards, others were assigned to yard maintenance duties, and a small number served in a gunnery division.<sup>3</sup> The housing that was built off base was also separated into "Anglo-American," "Latin-American" and "negro."<sup>4</sup>

Jim Crow laws were started after the ratification of the 13th Amendment, which abolished slavery in the US. These laws allowed local and state governments to legalize racial segregation. Although it could be found in any state, it was predominately supported in the south.

## African American Experiences in Corpus Christi

For the African Americans that did serve at NAS Corpus Christi, they were subjected to the Jim Crow laws that were popular in the southern states. Many northerners reflected on this being their first experiences with the Jim Crow laws. LT Erling Jordahl (Ret) remembers a train trip down to Corpus Christi, "It was an eye opener for me to observe the difference between the North and the South that existed then. We made occasional stops at depots and I saw over here a fountain that said colored water fountain and another one over here said white. They had the same designation for restrooms, this seemed very strange."<sup>5</sup> WAVE Margaret Shull Melott, an Indiana native also remembers her worst memory of Corpus Christi was being "ordered out of the only seat vacant simply because I sat down next to a black woman."<sup>3</sup>

For the African Americans unused to this treatment, it could pose a danger. In a trip back to Texas on a bus, Marine Sgt James Wagner and his companions were not familiar with the use of a "screen," a leather curtain, placed between the front and back of the bus for segregation. Due to the screen hitting them in the face with the rocking of the bus they removed it, leading the bus driver to threaten Wagner and his travel partners with a gun to replace the screen immediately. Wagner recalls, "And we was sittin' there petrified. Number one, we didn't know what he was talkin' about. Number two, they scared the livin' daylight out of us. And one old colored woman that was sitting in the seat by us, she got down on the floor and crawled between that man's legs, and said 'Son, here is what he's talkin' about."<sup>3</sup> This was an eye opening experience for Wagner and how they could expect to be treated even after their service.



Division X party at Club Alabama. (Woodrow Kramer)

Not everyone agreed with the segregated treatment of African Americans. LCDR Woodrow Kramer (Ret) was a gunnery instructor for Division X of the Ground and Gunnery Squadron. Assigned to his division were 18 Sailors, 15 of whom were African American. The Squadron Commanding Officer (CO) offered to throw a party for the division that could raise the most money during a bond drive. Division X sold the most, but the CO only took out the three white Sailors. "Upset by the CO's racism, Kramer questioned the officer, who told him that he could have the 'privilege' of taking out the blacks, if he wished to."<sup>3</sup> Kramer did just that and arranged a party at Club Alabama for the 15 African American Sailors and their guests (pictured above). They ultimately had a great time and the night even led to Kramer meeting Louis Armstrong.

The majority of the African Americans were placed into messmen positions. Wagner recalls, "Even though we admired the uniforms and everything, we understood that all the blacks that were in the service at that time were in food service. So that was my first brush with how regimented and how segregated it was."<sup>3</sup> Ewing Hicks, a messman, enjoyed the position he was given saying, "I think that because of that [time] in my life that I have benefited from it. And I know if I was young or would have to go that way again, I would still chose the Navy."<sup>3</sup>

## Hispanic Relations in Corpus Christi

Hispanics were another minority group who also felt strained relationships in Corpus Christi. "By 1940, people of Mexican descent in the US were twice as likely to have been born and raised in the States than not."<sup>6</sup> But even those born in the US were often made to feel like foreigners in their own country.



Young man is dumping cotton into a truck, which will carry it to a ginning mill. (Library of Congress)

Albert Sheldon, a civil servant at the Assembly and Repair Department, reflects that, "The white folks got the better jobs. Us Mexicans and the Afro-Americans, we used to get the cleaning jobs."<sup>1</sup>

Hispanics who lived in Corpus Christi before the war have different memories of the treatment they received after the war. Lauro Castillo reflects, "There were places you couldn't go in [before the war]. You couldn't go into a barbershop, a theater. After the war they began to treat us as equal...and they took down those signs. We could go into places. But before that, restaurants [had signs that said]: 'No Mexicans Allowed.'"<sup>8</sup>

Raymond Muñiz remembers his experience in Corpus Christi. According to an interview by Dr. Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez, Muñiz grew up aware of inequality. In school in Robstown, Texas, and later in Corpus, Anglos and Latinos were separated into different classrooms. Exacerbating the inequality, most Latino students had to work on farms and only attended school intermittently.<sup>8</sup> However; Muñiz said, "World War II was the best thing to happen to Mexicans because once they got back they had the GI [Bill]. They could go to any school for free, GI rights."<sup>8</sup>



Example of sign found on businesses in Texas. (Russell Lee)

Guadalupe Rodriguez Flores was stationed in Corpus Christi as a teletype operator and remembers her time there fondly. She enjoyed meeting people from around the country and learned that "not all of us think the same." She remembers playing tennis and basketball, taking a boat trip across Corpus Christi Bay, watching planes land in the water and having young Sailors smuggle her better food from the officers' mess hall when she had to work nights. "What little experience I got, I thought it was worth it," she said, "both to my country and especially to myself."<sup>9</sup>

## American GI Forum

Hector P. Garcia graduated from the University of Texas at Galveston medical school in 1940. Dr. Garcia had to complete his residency in Nebraska; due to his race, he could not attend an internship in a Texas hospital. Dr. Garcia served as an Army medic in the war and set up a medical practice in Corpus Christi. Upon his return, he saw the discrimination toward Hispanic veterans continue and began the American GI Forum to assist those being treated wrongfully and not receiving their GI benefits.

The first turning point for the American GI Forum occurred when Dr. Garcia stepped in when a local funeral home refused to allow a service to be conducted at the chapel for Private Felix Longoria of Three Rivers, Texas. The funeral home director said, "We just never made it a practice to let [Mexican Americans] use the chapel and we don't want to start now."<sup>6</sup> Garcia notified news media outlets, politicians, and government officials to rectify the situation. Senator Lyndon B Johnson acknowledged this injustice and arranged for Longoria to be buried at Arlington National Cemetery. This was just the beginning of the work the American GI forum performed in the equal rights for Hispanics.



Dr. Hector P. Garcia military portrait. (Mary and Jeff Bell Library)

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