



## A Forgotten Milestone



### Blacks in the U.S. Navy

While the Negro soldier was proving himself to be of character, the Negro sailor went forth to do service for his country. Throughout its history, the Navy has never barred free Negroes from enlisting, and in September 1861 it adopted the policy of recruiting former slaves. This was two years before the Army even allowed Negroes to enlist. Suffering during the entire course of the war from a shortage of men, the Navy encouraged the Negroes to join the service. *"Fill up the crews with contrabands obtained from Major-General Dix, as there is not an available sailor in the North."* This advice was sent by Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles on August 5, 1862, to Commodore Charles Wilkes, Commander of the James River Flotilla. The Mississippi Squadron, under Admiral David D. Porter, was also suffering a shortage. Admiral Porter wrote to Rear Admiral A.H. Foote on January 3, 1862, *"Don't be astonished at the list of...I send you. I could get no men. They do first-rate."* Five months later, Rear Admiral S.F. DuPont informed Secretary Welles that the contrabands on board the vessels in the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron were *"very useful, particularly as there is difficulty in obtaining men in the North ports."*

### "No Question of Color Has Ever Come Up..."



Eager to recruit Negro sailors and to have them re-enlist, the Navy tended to treat them fairly well. Segregation and discrimination were at a minimum. Negroes were messed and quartered with other crew members. During prisoner exchanges the Negro sailor was spared the uncertainty experienced by his Negro brother in the Army. Secretary Welles wrote in his diary on October 5, 1864, *"No question of color has ever come up in regard to naval exchange."*

The Negroes responded in large numbers to the Navy's beckoning, eventually comprising one quarter of the men sailing in the Union fleet. Although precise figures on black naval personnel is lacking,

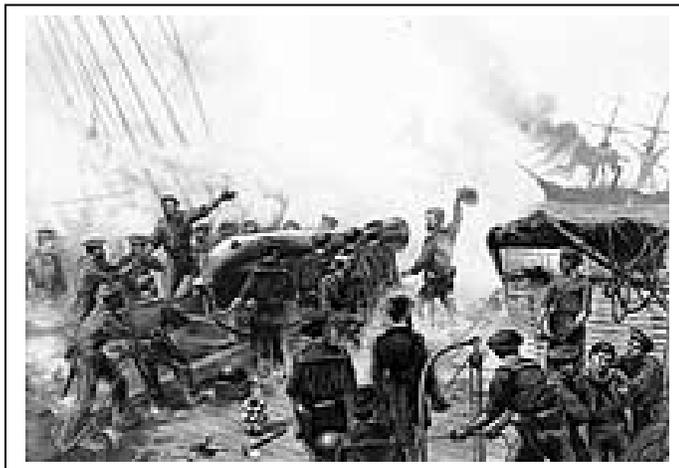
Secretary of the Navy John D. Long, in a letter written on April 2, 1902, quotes the Superintendent of the Naval Records Office as reporting that, of the 118,044 enlistments in the Navy during the Civil War, one fourth, or approximately 29,511, were Negroes.

Aboard the U.S.S. *CAIRO* there were four Negro sailors holding the rank of Seaman. The majority of the regular Navy viewed the *CAIRO* and her sister boats as "experimental," thus the bulk of the crew were volunteers. Of the 175 men aboard the *CAIRO*, only 28 had sailing or naval experience. The four black sailors brought such experience with them, having served as sailors or boatsmen in the private sector.

## Sinking the CSS ALABAMA

The Negroes served aboard Union ships in various positions and ranks, including officers. They participated in some of the great naval battles of the Civil War. One such battle took place thousands of miles from home off the coast of France. On Sunday morning, June 19, 1864, the Confederate raider *ALABAMA* steamed out of Cherbourg harbor to meet its doom in an engagement with the *USS KEARSARGE*. On the *KEARSARGE* were fifteen Negro enlisted men of various ratings.

In this historic duel, in which the *ALABAMA* went down in forty fathoms of water, Seaman Joachim Pease, loader of No. 1 gun, received the Navy Medal of Honor. Acting Master David H. Sumner wrote of Seaman Pease, "...possessing qualities higher than courage or fortitude which fully sustained his reputation as one of the best men in the ship."



## Navy Medal of Honor



The Navy had its roster of Negro sailors who did their duties effectively during battle with little recognition. At least forty-nine Union vessels had Negro crewmen who were killed, captured or wounded in action. Negro naval casualties numbered an estimated 800; approximately one quarter of the Navy total of 3,220. To these battle casualties must be listed an estimated 2,000 Negro seamen who died of disease. Eight Negro sailors received the Navy Medal of Honor for valor.

Much has been written about the Negro soldier's display of courage during the Civil War. Yet the Negro sailor had been quietly fighting for his country since the

Revolutionary War. Because of the long history of Negroes in the Navy, little is written about the Negro sailor during the Civil War. It was not due to their lack of participation, but because the U.S. Navy has always been desegregated.

If the Negro sailor's quality of work and respect from his fellow sailors could be judged by Civil War photographs, such as the one on display at the *USS Cairo* Museum, it would be safe to say the burden of battle was shared equally. This photo shows Seamen George Antone, E.H. Freeman, J.W. Mitchell, and William Robinson, proud members of the *CAIRO* crew.



Men of the  
*USS Mendota*

### Sources:

*The Civil War Times Illustrated*,  
Feb. 1985  
*Negro of the Civil War*  
*Official Records of the Union and  
Confederate Navies in the War  
of the Rebellion: Ser I, Vol 3*  
*The Old Steam Navy*  
*U.S. Colored Troops*