

# On Board USS *Mason*

GRADES 6-12



## Overview

This activity is geared toward participants in grades 6-12. The estimated amount of time to deliver this lesson is 60 minutes.

The destroyer USS *Mason* was one of two U.S. Navy ships during World War II with a predominantly Black crew. It was only in service for one year, but on it, Black sailors were able to perform duties on a combat vessel outside of the normal Steward's Branch. However, almost all of the officers on *Mason* were white, so the power dynamic between Black sailors and their white superior officers still existed on board. Participants will use the oral histories of two *Mason* crew members to further their understanding of the experience on board a ship like *Mason*.

*Content Warning: In this lesson, the term "negro" is used to describe Black Americans. At the time, this term was not considered offensive, however today is considered inappropriate. Please preview the lesson materials and discuss with your students in advance.*



## Objective

Participants will be able to evaluate the experiences of Black sailors in new roles and assess the true definition of *integration*.



## Materials

- Guide to the Command of Negro Naval Personnel, "Problems of Command," February 1944
- Oral history compilation of Horace Banks and Winfrey Roberts
- USS *Mason* photos



## Inquiry

Introduce participants to the “Guide to the Command of Negro Naval Personnel.” This document was for white officers, providing them with instructions on how to command Black sailors, now that Black sailors could serve in a wider range of ratings, or occupations. It was released in 1944.

Provide background information on the status of Black sailors in the Navy before and during World War II. Have participants read the provided section, “Problems of Command.” Discuss the following questions:

- Describe the tone of this pamphlet. Who are the author and audience?
- What does the language used in this pamphlet tell you about the relationship between Black sailors and their white superior officers?
- When this pamphlet was released, the Navy had recently allowed Black sailors to access any rate. What kinds of experiences do you predict Black sailors had as they moved into roles outside the steward’s branch?



## Investigation

Distribute or have available photos of sailors on USS *Mason*. Provide background information on the ship and its crew. Before listening to the oral histories, discuss the following questions:

- Why might the Navy, with entirely white leadership, have agreed to allow Black sailors to crew a combat vessel?
- After reading the “Guide to the Command of Negro Naval Personnel,” what do you predict the experience might have been on board USS *Mason* for Black sailors?

Listen to or read [oral history excerpts](#) from Horace Banks and Winfrey Roberts. Discuss the following questions:

- How did being on a ship where Black sailors served outside the Steward Branch impact Horace and Winfrey’s experiences?
- What were the sailors’ relationships to the officers on *Mason*?



## Activity

### Integration

Review content on the USS *Mason* and share oral history transcripts. Pose the following question for participants to write or present a response to:

- What does it mean to be integrated? Was *Mason* truly an integrated ship?



### Lesson Connection

Have participants listen to the oral histories of Black stewards serving in the Navy during World War II, such as Eugene Smith Jr, Samuel Hayward and Levi Murray. Please see our lesson: **What is a Steward?**



### Background

#### Navy Policy

Navy regulations reflected broader social inequities back at home. The racial segregation laws and practices known as Jim Crow were in effect all across the United States, but most obviously in the South. In the Navy, Black sailors could only serve as stewards until June 1942. They faced discrimination and hostility by superiors and white enlisted sailors on board their vessels, and often had to fight for recognition when they achieved great successes.

The Navy enforced segregation, especially prior to 1942. Black sailors, for example, were forced to sit in the “colored” car on train rides while being sent to their training camps. Once there, the Navy kept Black trainees in separate facilities or required them to use certain spaces at different times. Black recruits also faced hostility from civilians in the towns they were stationed in, being barred from restaurants, theaters and other places of business.

Once past training, the Navy assigned Black sailors to the least desirable jobs. Stewards and steward's mates were in charge of cleaning and organizing officers' living quarters, serving food in the officers' wardroom, assisting the cooks in the galley and other similar duties. During wartime, stewards could be trained as gunners and placed in a gun tub as a group in case of an emergency.

## USS *Mason*

USS *Mason* was laid down in October 1943, and named after Ensign Newton Henry Mason, a decorated aviator who died in combat the previous year. It was one of only two ships during World War II to be crewed by a predominantly Black crew, the other being a submarine chaser.

At the time, Black sailors were limited to shore service or to the Steward's Branch, performing menial duties like serving and cleaning for officers. On *Mason*, however, Black sailors filled a wide variety of enlisted duties. 160 of the 204 crew members on board were Black. For almost all of its service, all of the officers were white. *Mason* served as a convoy escort. After several trips back and forth across the Atlantic, *Mason* was decommissioned in October 1945.

The decision to designate *Mason* as an all-Black crew was influenced by a number of factors. In the 1930s, civil rights leaders, including the NAACP, were more willing to accept segregated units in all branches of the military. In the 1940s, however, they held a firmer position pushing for integrated units. In 1944, Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox died and was replaced by James Forrestal. Forrestal questioned the stereotypes associated with Black sailors, and authorized *Mason* and USS PC-1264, the other World War II-era all-Black crew.

In September 1944, *Mason* was part of a convoy of slow-moving craft in treacherous, stormy weather. The convoy took four weeks to cross the Atlantic and the ship and crew survived a 70 degree roll. For the crew's heroism, the commanding officer put *Mason* up for a commendation. However, the commendation was lost. It was not until the 1990s that the Secretary of the Navy, John Dalton, and President Bill Clinton honored the ship's surviving veterans.



## Additional Resources/References

USS *Mason*: First in its Class:

<https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/uss-mason-us-navy#:~:text=The%20USS%20Mason%20>



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*Full Muster: Inclusive Histories on Historic Naval Ships* has been made possible in part by a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities: Democracy demands wisdom.

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## Documents and Images

### Guide to the Command of Negro Naval Personnel, "Problems of Command," February 1944

#### SECTION III: PROBLEMS OF COMMAND

The same command techniques are effective for Negro and for white enlisted personnel. In addition to thorough knowledge of his technical duties, the basic requirements of command are that the officer know his men and hold their confidence.

In the case of the Negro, this means that the officer must be keenly aware that special questions growing out of the Negro's history in the United States will be encountered. At the same time, he must never assume that all Negroes are any more alike with regard to a particular characteristic than, for example, all men born in New York City.

#### ATTITUDES TOWARDS SERVICE IN THE NAVY

The Negro has long resented his period of exclusion from general service in the Navy. Now that he has been accepted other than for commissary duties he remains conscious of the fact that his admission was not without reluctance and is doubtful about the possibility of participation in accordance with ability.

Assignment to the Steward's Branch and as Cooks and Bakers is looked on generally with suspicion as reflecting a belief that he is fit only to do the traditional work of food handling. Work at NAD's and other heavy labor also brings up the idea that he is to be kept as much as possible in the less attractive types of work.

Such sensitivity may seem unreasonable to officers who are doing their best to utilize manpower in accordance with their considered judgment of war needs, individual abilities and other circumstances over which they have no control. It is, however, a natural reaction for a group which has had generations of experience with occupational restriction.

#### ATTITUDES CAN BE IMPROVED

Although colored, like white enlisted men, frequently are unwilling or unable to admit personal shortcomings as adequate reason for failure to receive desired assignments and promotions, alertness on the part of officers in the recognition of individual merit is quickly recognized by the men, and avoids giving any basis for discontent.

Knowledge that white enlisted men of comparable ability are assigned to tasks similar to those being performed by Negroes is also of great benefit to Negro morale. Indoctrination in the military importance of arduous duties without glamor is helpful. Finally, it is a good principle that the less satisfaction and prestige men can get out of their work, the more effort should be made to provide off-duty recreational facilities and to encourage their use.

The Negro's skepticism about his role in the Navy has been stressed because it is an important factor in his effective utilization. It may also be mentioned that this skepticism has probably been costly to the Navy in another way, for there is reason to believe that a goodly number of more capable and skilled Negroes have avoided induction into the Navy because they did not believe they would have the opportunity to

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make their best contribution. In view of the need for leadership among the men, the loss of even a few such men has been serious.

### EVEN COMPLIMENTS MAY BE MISUNDERSTOOD

It is easy to understand why Negroes do not like words or humor symbolizing supposed racial traits or their traditional restricted role in the American community. It is more difficult to appreciate the fact that even well-intentioned and admiring emphasis on supposed advantageous qualities similarly may be cause for annoyance.

The annoyance of this type most likely to occur in the Naval Establishment is the entirely friendly insistence that Negroes contribute to both formal and informal entertainments by showing off their alleged superior abilities in singing, dancing, boxing, or burlesque theatricals.

Although individual Negroes have been outstanding in these forms of entertainment, there is no scientific evidence of inherited racial qualities giving Negroes an advantage in these activities over other races. Perhaps their comparative success in athletics and entertainment has resulted from their being permitted a more normal participation in these fields. They have been pushed forward to do their popularly ascribed specialties so often that in many instances they have become suspicious that tap dancing, guitar playing, the singing of spirituals, and the like, may now be symbols of their special racial status.

Some Negroes can, and would like the chance to put on performances not characterized as Negro. It is a good rule to let all volunteer entertainers decide for themselves what to offer the audience. Under

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### RACIAL SEPARATION

The idea of compulsory racial segregation is disliked by almost all Negroes, and literally hated by many. This antagonism is in part a result of the fact that as a principle it embodies a doctrine of racial inferiority. It is also a result of the lesson taught the Negro by experience that in spite of the legal formula of "separate but equal facilities," the facilities open to him under segregation are in fact usually inferior as to location or quality to those available to others.

The accomplishment of the assigned mission through the harmonious and efficient use of existing equipment and facilities should always be the objective of the commanding officer. Joint use of facilities is frequently possible and desirable, particularly where the ratio of Negro to white personnel is not high. Signs restricting the use of facilities to one or the other of the races are especially offensive to Negroes and under no circumstances should they be used in the Naval Establishment. Difficulties may be minimized if it is realized that in most instances objections voiced by white personnel emanate from a small minority and are usually in the nature of a test of the commanding officer's mettle. If the policy laid down by the commanding officer is impartial, fair, and reasonable, the men, white and Negro alike, are quick to realize it and to accept the situation providing it is clear that the policy will be enforced.

A policy of careful experimentation on the part of commanding officers, with emphasis away from compulsory separation, will usually enable them to arrive at the proper solution when faced with a problem of race relations. Final decisions as to the course to be followed within the broader pattern of Naval regulations are best left to the individual command.

Credit: Navy History and Heritage Command

Transcript:

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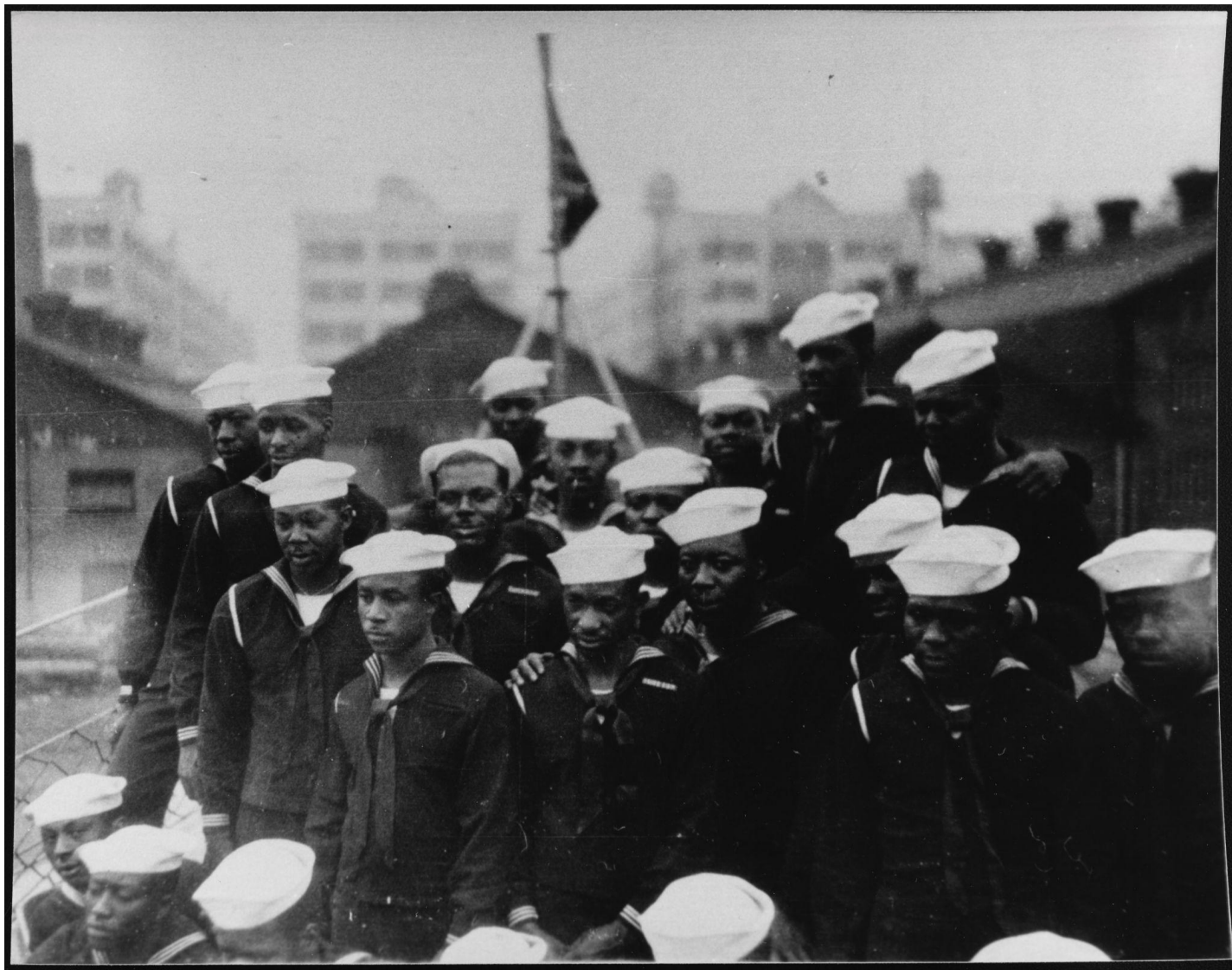
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Two sailors standing before the newly-commissioned USS *Mason*

Credit: National Archives and Records Administration



USS *Mason*'s crew while docked in New York City

Credit: Naval History and Heritage Command



USS *Mason* sailor posing with guns on board

Credit: National Archives and Records Administration



Lt. Commander William M. Blackford assumes command of USS *Mason* at the commissioning ceremony

Credit: National Archives and Records Administration



Lt. A. Boyd Turner at the microphone during USS *Mason*'s commissioning ceremony

Credit: National Archives and Records Administration



Sailors of the USS *Mason* look at their newly commissioned ship

Credit: National Archives and Records Administration