

Primary Source: A Black Officer in an Integrated Army ^[1]

How did African and Black Americans experience the segregation and later desegregation of the armed forces?

Felix Goodwin, a career U.S. Army officer, served in the military during the era of segregation and advanced into positions where he actively assisted in desegregating the Army. He also commanded largely white and mixed race battalions. Goodwin was born in Lawrence, Kansas in 1919. He joined the Conservation Corps and then joined the U.S. Army in 1939. He served overseas during the war. After the War, he was stationed in Germany where he was active in integration activities. He returned to the U.S. in 1953 where he continued to directly work at efforts to desegregate and integrate the Army.

In 1998 he provided an oral history interview of his experience working toward integration of the Army and leading racially mixed battalions. Read an excerpt below.

I got moved to headquarters—that was all white guys from Lubbock, Texas. The Sergeant Major owned a store in Lubbock and everybody in HQ had worked with him back home. But it ended up I was pretty well running things. Our first inspection was a mess, though. Some white replacements had come in from Mississippi and Georgia and then we had about six or seven black soldiers integrated in to the unit. Our guys were mostly cooks and others working in the motor pool, no black non-commissioned officers.

For the first inspection the white soldiers had taken big sheets of white paper and drawn flags on them. There was a Confederate flag, and on the other wall there was that [old flag with the curled snake](#) that said, “Don’t Tread on Me.” And they were all standing there when I walked in to inspect the area. I didn’t say a word, just started inspecting the stuff in the lockers. I cited them for scuffed shoes and stuff not hung properly, but I did not say anything about those flags. I went into the next room and it was the same thing—the same two flags—a Confederate and a Rattlesnake flag. The third room was like that too. The fourth room was not, and I said, “Where’s all your flags?” and they said, “Sir, we are Yankees.” So I didn’t question them, I just moved on. But the next room had flags. When I got to the last room I found my colored cooks, colored mechanics, and so forth. I asked one man, “Why aren’t you in the room with the mechanics?” But the [white] First Sergeant started stammering and told me there was not enough room for all of the mechanics to be together in the mechanics area. And I said, “Well, god dammit, you better find some room. You’ve got six stripes on your arm and I can take them away.” He tried to tell me I could not understand him because colored people were Protestants and he was Catholic, but I told him, ‘Hey, I’m a Catholic, too.’ I had a reputation of being one hard man, and mostly I lived up to my reputation. So I told the sergeant to get his men assembled around the steps of the building. They all came running and they had this grin on their faces, like oh, yeah, he’s gonna be raising hell about our flags.

"Soldiers," I said, "we have a problem in our company. I see we have a very patriotic company that loves flags. But, I'm mad as hell because I did not see a United States flag up there. We've got a Nazi flag, a Confederate flag, a don't-tread-on-me-Revolutionary-War flag, but, I don't see the flag of our country. So starting at the front door and into every room, we are going to have all four flags—the American flag, and then those other three that you want. Which means we are going to have to get the stands and enough flags for every room. Now in your footlockers, you're going to have to take down your mama's pictures and your girlfriend's, and put those flags in there, too. I can't force you to buy the flags, but we'll just proportion the cost across everyone here. I think it will cost about \$500.00. So all the men who do not want to pay for the flags, just step over here to my left." Well, that left about 15 guys to my right, and they were looking at me like I was crazy. So I told them that they had about three hours to raise the money. When we met again in three hours, of course those men did not have the money. But they could tell I wasn't going to take any of that mess. I told them they would all be privates if this thing didn't clear up. I said [to the white soldiers], I didn't care whether their Daddy was the Head of the Ku Klux Klan. I said, "This is the United States Army. I don't give a damn if your daddy is Robert E. Lee or J.E.B. Stuart or whoever. It makes no difference to me. The Civil War is over." But, I was tough on the black guys, too. When they complained I told them, "I don't care how high up you are in the NAACP. We have an American company here in Germany and you are going to obey the Army regulations. I don't intend to have any racial problems in my Company." When we had our re-inspection we made a 97 out of 100. We continuously got the highest grades in the corp[s]. Those fifteen guys just fell in line and became military after that. They may have muttered among themselves but not to me. That was my experience in Germany when we integrated.

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