

REPORT ON THE NEGRO SOLDIER

By Major Robert F. Cocklin

A firsthand report based on three and one-half years
of wartime service with the 93d Infantry Division

The contribution of the Negro Soldier to the victorious completion of World War II has been the subject of much controversy. Unfortunately, the voices that have been raised the loudest and with the firmest convictions have been in large part those least qualified to judge. After serving three and a half years with the 93d Infantry Division, the first colored division to be activated, I have here set down some of my thoughts and conclusions. They are based entirely upon my own observations and experiences.

The relationship between the white and colored peoples of America is too complex for discussion here and of course it carried over when the Negro became a soldier. Lifelong prejudices survived the expansion of the Army, although the pressure of work, training and war tended to force them somewhat into the background.

The Doolittle Committee and its subsequent report have clearly indicated the reluctance of the civilian in general to accept the more disciplined life of the soldier. In this, the colored soldier in no way differed from his white countryman. But unfortunately, the rigors of military discipline were all too frequently tagged "discrimination" when they concerned the Negro soldier. In this regard, I firmly believe that a large part of the Negro press did a great disservice to the members of their race. Since they provided the chief sources of news about their race, Negro publications were read with avid interest by every colored soldier who could lay his hands on one. Often, these papers were



handed around until they were almost worn out.

Much of the Negro press, with its sensational news stories, continually screamed that the colored soldier was being discriminated against at every turn. Obvious distortion of facts were quite often evident. Journalism of this type may have been good for circulation but it was definitely poor for the morale of the troops and served only to stir up unrest. A less sensational and distorted Negro press could have promoted understanding between the races by encouraging the colored soldier to demonstrate his capabilities in the performance of his duty as a good citizen and soldier. My own impression was that the press effort was almost entirely in the opposite direction, and my thoughts regarding this disservice were concurred in by a number of colored soldiers serving under me.

I joined the 93d Division shortly after its activation in May, 1942. My duties during the ensuing three and a half years were chiefly those of a battery officer and commander except for the final months when I served on the division general staff. My duties were with the troops and not those of a detached observer.



WILLING TO BE SOLDIERS

From the beginning I found most of the soldiers with whom I came in contact ready and willing to do their duty as soldiers. There was a large number of serious infractions of regulations at the outset but with the general courts-martial running daily, the element of serious offenders was gradually diminished and by the time the division departed for maneuvers, it was a reasonably well trained and thoroughly well disciplined outfit.

The performance on maneuvers proved this.

Nevertheless, perhaps the biggest problem confronting the officers who trained the 93d Division was the general inability of the colored soldier to assimilate instruction. The Army General Classification Test scores of by far the greater part of the soldiers assigned to the 93d fell in the lower two of the five classified categories. This was, of course, far below the average on which the War Department had based its training plans and periods. In consequence, we simply had to slow our training program down and simplify it as much as possible. We went through the basic training cycle three times.

In the small unit of which I was a part I found that in those duties which could be learned "by-the-numbers" most of my men could soon become reasonably proficient. But in the more technical subjects which required original thought and understanding or initiative, this was by no means true. This is not an obstacle that an Army can overcome in a given training period or, for that matter, in a period of years. Certainly the expansion of educational facilities and better living conditions for colored people would eventually improve the situation materially, but the Army can never hope to overcome of itself the result of decades or generations of handicaps.



PAUCITY OF GOOD NONCOMS

In the structure of the Army, the noncommissioned officer is highly important, not only in training but in the execution of any assigned mission by a unit. In the 93d Division, we could not find enough men who were qualified to accept the responsibilities of a noncommissioned

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officer. Altogether too often these jobs had to be filled by men who had neither the actual nor potential qualifications of intelligence, nor the requisite sense of responsibility to make good noncommissioned officers. All that could be done was to select the best men available. Only a fraction could measure up to their jobs. This not only retarded the training program but throughout the active life of the division many of the duties normally done by noncoms had to be carried out by the officers in addition to their own normal duties.

Upon the activation of the division, the officer personnel were mostly white. Shortly after the division was activated, colored officers in the lower company grades began to come to us from officer candidate schools and from the Reserve Corps. The high standards required of candidates for OCS virtually prohibited a very large portion of Negro soldiers from selection to take this training. Those who made the grade, like all who gained commissions through OCS, did so through such close application and hard work. But there are officers of both races who went through OCS and who felt that they observed a certain amount of informal or unofficial relaxation of standards in some cases in order to permit the selection of the required number of Negro officer candidates for commissions. In any event, colored officers were sometimes assigned to duty with troops, without the best possible background and training for that job. (Here I must state that my observations do not cover colored officers in the Medical or Chaplain Corps. I am not qualified to judge their technical or spiritual abilities.)



The colored officer was the cynosure of all eyes as a leader of his race and unfortunately the failures tended to offset the fine jobs done by many of them. A good number did do an excellent job. Their conduct was gentlemanly and they did a great service to their race and Nation by their efforts. Such officers were in general promoted to captain and several reached field grade in various staff jobs.

But there were many officer failures. Often incompetent colored officers sought to hide their deficiencies by claiming discrimination. Such officers not only earned the disrespect of the white officers and men but were the subject of ridicule among members of their own race.

LACK OF EXPERIENCE IN LEADERSHIP

It is important to outline here some of the very real difficulties that faced the colored officer. First of all it was for most their first experience as leader of a group. Many of the white officers tended to be discriminatory and unfair to the colored officers. There were incompetents and failures among the white officers and this made the job of the colored officer even harder. Too many colored officers, particularly in the more technical branches (again I exclude medical officers and chaplains) were not sufficiently trained or schooled in their special work. These problems together with a seemingly ineradicable inferiority complex proved to be insurmountable obstacles for many colored officers. By the same token, many of those who did a fine job are especially to be congratulated on having overcome such real difficulties.



On the basis of these observations, it seems to me that a much more careful selection and training of colored officers is indicated for the

future. They have to take a position of responsibility, not only to the Army but to their race as a whole; failure to give a superior performance results in a loss to the Army. But it also reflects seriously upon the colored race quite regardless of whether the reflection is valid. It is, in my opinion, far more discriminatory to allow mediocre colored officers to be commissioned than it is to limit the number of such officers to the apparently smaller proportion who are actually well qualified.*

DIVISION IN COMBAT

The 93d Division did not see any extensive combat. The first operation against the enemy in which a combat team of the division participated was on Bougainville in 1944. These operations consisted mainly of patrol work and a considerable amount of artillery fire. I did not participate in any patrols in which action against the enemy took place. However, a just and fair estimate of the combat ability of the front-line colored soldier could hardly be made from those small, isolated actions. Negro artillery-men performed very creditably in this campaign. This fact is attested to by the division artillery commander of the American Division to which the combat team was attached. Subsequent combat experience by the division was limited to patrol action on the different islands upon which the division was stationed.



In November, 1944 the division was located in New Guinea. From that time until its return to the States the division was primarily used for base protection and supply functions. These are not the missions for

*It is my understanding that such corrective measures are already being taken as a result of the recent Gillem Board findings.

which a combat division is trained, but nonetheless it is a matter of official record that the 93d Division outclassed white troops doing similar work.

The successes of the division in these tasks warrant further study. They were largely due to a strict application of the principles set forth in a division plan entitled "Success in Combat." Every officer in the division was required to write it out from memory before becoming eligible for promotion. The plan's simplicity of approach made it particularly desirable for our troops. The plan for success in combat had four points: basic subjects, marching, security, combat mission. Logically arranged, it was a blueprint that could be understood by every soldier. Once the soldier knew and understood the plan, he was required to know and do each point in the plan successively and constantly until the mission was accomplished. The first step was to convert the individual to a soldier by requiring him to know and do his basic subject. Since the conversion of the individual could be accomplished only if he believed what he was required to do, the belief of his commanders had to be plainly evident.



The basic training subjects prescribed by the War Department were sound and ample in their scope. They were subjects in which accurate compliance could be required. A definite system was required in order to know and do these basic subjects. In relating the success of the division in their noncombat mission, the marching and security phases of this plan do not need recounting; however, the combat mission phase brings out another point that has a definite bearing. I quote: "Combat Mission: The individual must know his mission in order to accomplish it. The basic

subjects provide him with tangible and intangible tools with which to accomplish his mission." While there is nothing new in the principles of this plan - the publication and enforced adherence to it, clearly outlined to every man and officer exactly what was expected of him.

RECORD SET IN MOTOR MAINTENANCE

Despite the fact that the transportation of the division was in twenty-four-hour use doing dock work, etc., the 93d Division achieved the most outstanding record for motor vehicle maintenance of any unit in the Pacific Theater. Base commanders from various other bases were ordered to the division's headquarters at Morotai for the purpose of learning the methods by which this record was achieved. Actually it was very simple. It merely followed "the plan." Each soldier was required to know and do motor maintenance. Experience taught us that in our division this could be done only by-the-numbers. Therefore, every driver in the division was required to learn the mission of motor maintenance by committing to memory the following driver's creed:

"1st Echelon maintenance is driver's maintenance. It consists of those simple operations which can be entrusted to the skill of the average driver using the tools and equipment on the vehicle. They include: servicing, tightening, cleaning, lubrication, care of tools and equipment, and emergency roadside repair."

Daily periods of mass motor maintenance were strictly supervised by a number of officers in each unit. Consequently, as the driver began to appreciate the necessity for his job, he took pride in his work with a resulting motor maintenance record unmatched in the theater.



The 94d Division also exceeded the accomplishment of experienced white troops in dock work. Our average output measured in tons per hatch per man was considerably higher than the theater average. In military courtesy and discipline, the division surpassed any outfit I observed in the many bases I visited.

IMPROVEMENTS CAN COME

Fortunately, much has been learned from our experience with colored troops in this war. I think it has been proven conclusively that colored troops must have superior leadership and that there must be a much more critical selection of officers to serve with colored troops. This last applies both to colored officers and white. There must also be a rigorous and complete training program for men selected as noncommissioned officers. The steps being taken by the War Department now will undoubtedly fulfill most of these requirements, but full success and maximum efficiency cannot be insured by the War Department alone. A grave responsibility rests with the colored soldier himself. By exemplary demeanor and a determined effort to do his level best, he can go a long way toward breaking down the prejudices that now exist. In this, the Negro press has an opportunity to be of great assistance by adopting a policy of promoting good will instead of hell fire and brimstone routine it has so often used in the past.



I know that the Negro soldier made a great contribution to the victory just won. Careful application of the lessons learned will result in an even greater future contribution by the Negro soldier to the Army and to the Nation.

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