

Black Lifesavers of WWII

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The Medal of Honor was established by an act of the United States Congress, in the early days of the American Civil War, to recognize members of the military who distinguished themselves conspicuously by gallantry and intrepidity above and beyond the call of duty. While heroism has been shown throughout history to be both class and color-blind, the individuals responsible for recognizing these acts have not always been as egalitarian. Racist attitudes and segregationist policies combined to deprive African Americans and other minorities of recognition by means of the Medal of Honor. There were, however, exceptions: of the 2060 Medals of Honor distributed between the Civil War and Spanish-American War, 51 medals were awarded to African Americans.

One of the exceptions was Robert Augustus Sweeney, an ordinary seaman, who is one of only 19 servicemen to have received the Medal of Honor twice. In both instances, one in 1881 and the other in 1883, Sweeney, a powerful swimmer, dove off his ship, at the peril of his own life, to rescue shipmates who had fallen overboard.

Coinciding with white southern politicians regaining influence in Washington in the 1880s, mass migrations of former slaves to northern states and negative stereotyping of African Americans discrimination became widespread in American culture. By the turn of the new century, these attitudes were also reflected in the policies and nature of service by African Americans in the armed forces. Negroes were no longer deemed capable of serving in the navy in any capacity other than as stewards, messmen or stevedores. Black soldiers were no longer considered suitable or capable for combat roles and were assigned to quartermaster and manual labor details.

In World War I, approximately 350,000 African Americans served in the armed forces and the number exceeded a million men in World War II - but not one received the Medal of Honor - even when by circumstance or chance, they demonstrated all the qualities deserving recognition by the nation's highest honor. This chapter is devoted to the memory of two of these forgotten heroes who performed extraordinary feats of swimming.

Messman Charles Jackson French

The first of our two stories begins on the night of September 5th, 1942, when the American destroyer, USS Gregory, was patrolling the waters off of the hotly contested island of Guadalcanal, in the Solomon Islands. As the Gregory was making its way through one of the dangerous channels it was surprised by three Japanese destroyers steaming right at her. The Japanese opened fire and scored direct hits. With the ship dead in the water and deck in flames, the captain gave orders to abandon ship.

The story of the sinking and dramatic rescue of the Gregory's crew first came to light when Robert N. Adrian, a young ensign, told a reporter about how a powerful, 22-year-old Negro mess attendant, named French, swam through shark-infested waters, towing to safety a raft load of 24 wounded seamen from the USS Gregory.

Ensign Adrian was the only man on the Gregory's bridge to survive, and he floated away helplessly as the ship sank beneath him. It was a moonless, inky-black night and after floating for a while, he heard voices and discovered a life raft filled with wounded men. Though wounded himself, Adrian was able to hang on until pulled into the raft.

"I knew that if we floated ashore we would be taken as prisoners of war," he said. "Then French volunteered to swim the raft away from shore. He stripped off his clothes and asked for help to tie a rope around his waist so he could attempt to tow the wounded men to safety."

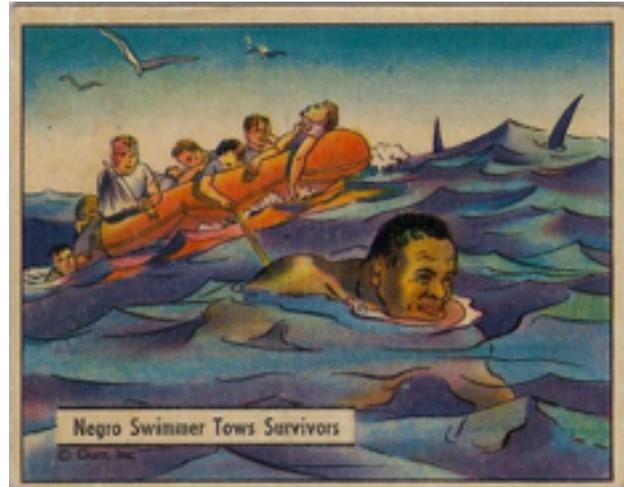
Adrian told him it was impossible – that he would only be giving himself up to the sharks that surrounded them.

"French responded that he was not afraid. He was a powerful swimmer and swam all night, six to eight hours, until we were eventually saved by a landing craft."

Ensign Adrian was seriously wounded at the time and only knew the messman by his last name. When he repeated the story on a national radio broadcast he made a plea to learn his whereabouts, as it was known he was on leave in the States. When his identity was established by the National Broadcasting Company, Charles Jackson French became one of the heroes of the war and the public clamored to learn more about him.

Charles Jackson French was a 22 year-old orphan from Foreman, Arkansas, who had enlisted in the U.S. Navy in 1937 at the age of 18. We don't know how he learned to swim, but Forman was at the confluence of the Red Little Rivers and most likely he was self taught in those rivers, like most boys of the era. Described by the press as a "human tugboat," his feat was dramatized on the air, portrayed in newspaper comic strips, on trading cards and on a calendar. He appeared on numerous radio programs, received a royal welcome from citizens of all races in his sister Viola's hometown of Omaha, Nebraska and he became the center of attention wherever he went. Certainly Messman French's act was far "beyond the call of duty" and a high decoration seemed assured: certainly at least a Navy Cross, and possibly even a Medal of Honor.

When there was no official recognition accorded French by the Naval department after six months had passed, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People started



129. **Negro Swimmer Tows Survivors**

After the sinking of the Destroyer "Gregory" off the Solomons, in October, 1942, a raft-load of wounded seamen from the stricken ship was towed to safety by a Negro mess attendant, known only as "Franch." With a young Ensign and weary seamen clinging to the overloaded raft's sides the frail craft started drifting seaward. It was then that the brave colored man stripped off his clothes and tied a tow-line around his waist. He braved shark-filled waters to bring the raft and its occupants to safety. After six hours in the water the powerful swimmer was sighted by a barge as he neared the shore and the seamen were taken off. The young ensign who reported the brave act had to be hospitalized, as a result of injuries sustained, and thus never learned the full name of the heroic swimmer.

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making inquiries at the Naval Department. They were informed that no recommendations for awards had been received in French's case, but the department promised to investigate.

When finally issued in May 1943, it came in the form of a Letter of Commendation from Adm. William F Halsey, Jr., then Commander of the Southern Pacific Fleet. It read:

“FOR meritorious conduct in action while serving on board of a destroyer transport, which was badly damaged during the engagement with Japanese forces in the British Solomon Islands on September 5, 1942. After the engagement, a group of about fifteen men were adrift on a raft, which was being deliberately shelled by Japanese naval forces. French tied a line to himself and swam for more than two hours without rest, thus attempting to tow the raft. His conduct was in keeping with the highest traditions of the Naval Service.”

The survivors felt that French deserved a higher tribute than the admiral's letter, but the Gregory episode was complicated by the issuance of a posthumous Silver Star to Lt. Cmdr. H. F. Bauer, the ship's commanding officer. Wounded and dying, the skipper ordered two companions to leave him and go to the aid of another crewman who was yelling for help. He was never seen again. It would have been nearly unprecedented for a naval subordinate to receive a higher decoration than his supervisor for an act of heroism.

A few years ago, Chester Wright, who had been Chief Steward aboard the USS Princeton, wrote a fascinating book on the history of black men in the US Navy entitled *Black Men and Blue Water*.

Wright had met French at a friend's house in San Diego in the early 1950s. The following excerpt, printed with Wright's permission, recounts French's version of the story as told to the author:

“When Gregory was hit by them planes, a lot of us got off before she sunk and many of my friends wuz hurt. I was on a raft with some of them and we started drifting towards land. I knowed that if we got close enough, them Japs would kill us. They, we had been told, would soon as kill a man already wounded as anybody else.

“So, I being lucky enough to not get hurt, jes put a line around my middle and started a-paddling away from the beach. Then I got the hell scared outta me. I noticed they wuz sharks a-circling around that raft, a-waitin for they dinner. So I thought what's wurse: them sharks or them Japs? At least them sharks will be quick. I don't know 'bout them Japs. They be some mean 'mothers.' So, I jes keep paddling.

“I nearly peed on myself when one of them sharks teched my feet. I jes froze and tried to surface and float, git my feet outta the water. They wuz a whole lot of other folks in the water,



some of um hurt purty bad.” Then French laughed uproariously and said, “I guess them sharks decided to not have ‘scairt-nigger’ for lunch.”

Then he changed from laughter to what the author had trouble discerning. It was anger, frustration, then tears. On questioning him, after waiting two minutes or so, French said, in a more subdued, angry voice:

“When we wuz picked up and the hurt ones wuz taken to be worked on, we wuz taken to the rest camp with the others. I heard they came up wid some of that ‘race-shit.’

“‘You culud mess boy’. I wuz told, ‘you can go over there where the culud boys stay.’”

“Then some of the them white boys, what wuz on the raft, and other sailors from the Gregory’s crew said ‘He ain’t going nowhere! He is a member of the Gregory’s crew and he damned well will stay right here with the rest of us. Anybody who tries to take him anywhere had betta be ready to go to ‘general quarters (ready to fight) with all of us.’ The boy who did all the talking was from either Alabama or Georgia.

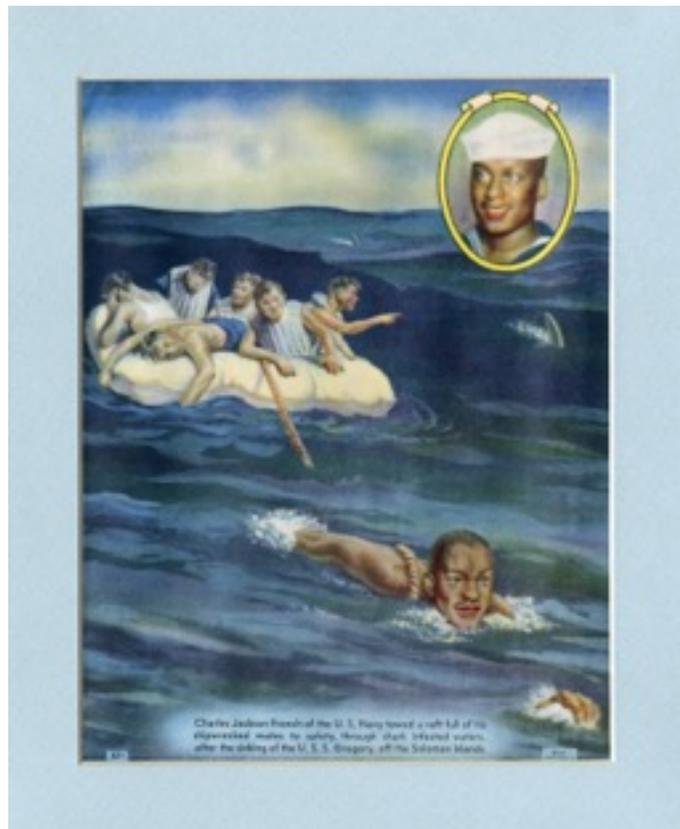
“So for near on to five minutes, there be a stand-off, us covered with oil and grime in our hair and all over our clothes, in our eyes, and them clean master-at-arms folks. We musta looked like wild men.”

“Anyway, one of the master-at-arms said, ‘Them fools mean it. Just leave them alone. We got other folk who need help.’

“Them ‘crackers’ retreated, tucked they tails and left!”

This conversation with Charles Jackson French occurred shortly after the Korean War. The author attempted to probe for the cause of such intense emotion concerning an incident that happened years before. French’s shoulder shook, tears coursed down his cheeks. And all the author could get from him was, “Them white boys stood up for me.”

According to Wright, French was claimed by alcoholism in later years. From close questioning of friends, it would appear that he returned from the Pacific Wars, “stressed out” from seeing too much death and destruction. He probably was discharged with mental problems and left to fend for himself. A sad ending for a great swimming hero.



Private George Watson

WAR, with its brutality, cruelty, hatred and impersonal, random violence, always seems to bring out the worst in some people. Strangely, it also brings out the best in others. Against all odds, “ordinary” folks perform some of the most daring, the most extraordinary, the bravest acts imaginable, and even unimaginable, by extending their humanity to others, who most often are strangers.

The Japanese attack on Pear Harbor, on December 7, 1941 was coordinated with similar attacks on British and American strongholds in Hong Kong, the Philippines, Thailand, Malaya and Singapore. As the Japanese forces rapidly secured territory in South-East Asia, the East Indies, and the Central and South-West Pacific, the Americans and British retreated to Australia.

By March of 1942, the Japanese had established bases in New Guinea, but they had over extended themselves. The allies established their own bases on the Island to stop the Japanese before they could attack Australia and they set up a supply depot at Porlock Harbour. One of the ships transporting supplies and army personnel from Australia to New Guinea for the offensive was the SS's Jacob. The 's Jacob was a 35 year old steamer that had been chartered by the US Army, from the Dutch East India Trading Company. It had Dutch officers and a Javanese crew.

On March 8th, 1943, as the s' Jacob was nine miles from Porlock Harbour, it was sighted by nine high-flying Japanese bombers escorted by twelve fighters on their way to attack the depot. The aircraft scored three direct hits and as she started to sink the order was given to abandon ship. Among the passengers was George Watson, a 28 year old native of Birmingham, Alabama and a 1942 graduate of Colorado Agricultural & Mining School, a colored college. Although a college graduate when he signed up for the army on September 1, 1942, he was not considered for officer training school. Instead he was assigned to report for basic training at Fort Benning, Georgia, after which he was assigned to the 2nd Colored Battalion, 29th Quartermaster Regiment and shipped out to Papua New Guinea. He was with members of his unit when the Japanese attacked the ship.

When he found himself in the water, he saw that many of the other passengers and crew struggling to save themselves either because they were severely injured, were unable to swim or were paralyzed with fear. Seeing the tragedy unfolding before his eyes, and without giving a thought to his own safety, he courageously started helping those in trouble. He swam back and forth across that deadly scene, dragging strangers to floating wreckage and the few available life rafts so that they might live. Over and over and over again, he swam to save others until he himself was so exhausted, that when the ship went down eighteen minutes after the attack, he was pulled under by the suction of the sinking ship and was never seen again.

For this action, Watson was originally awarded the Army's second-highest decoration, the Distinguished Service Cross. He was the first African American to receive the Distinguished Service Cross in World War II. Then in 1993, the armed forces recognized that race played a part in denying African Americans their due and commissioned researchers from Shaw University, a historically black college, to comb through the records of Black servicemen. So it was that on January 13th, 1997, Watson's award was upgraded to the Medal of Honor by President William J. Clinton along with six other African American veterans of World War II. Watson had no known next of kin, so his Medal is displayed in the U.S. Army Quartermaster Museum in Fort Lee, Virginia.

On July 28, 1997, the US Navy commissioned a new equipment transport ship the USNS Watson (T-AKR 310). It was named after Private George Watson who exemplified the partnership among soldiers, sailors and merchant mariners. A partnership as strong today as when Watson gave his life for his comrades.

