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## Navy Medicine Highlights First African-Americans in the Navy Medical Department

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(NO COMMENTS)

By **Andre Sobocinski**, *historian*, [U.S. Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery](#)



A company of African-American recruits at Camp Robert Smalls. (Courtesy of Navy Department)

From the dawn of the U.S Navy, [African-Americans have played a vital role in its history](#) and have embodied the basic tenets of service and commitment to duty. At the same time, the African-American experience in Navy history is a story about breaking barriers, living through a segregated service, and overcoming limitations of opportunity(1) on the path to what Admiral Elmo “Bud” Zumwalt called “One Navy.”

Below, are the names of some of the “first” African-Americans in the Navy Medical Department who trail blazed a path for all who came afterward.

### [Hospital Corps](#)

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African-Americans were among the first sailors to serve as Loblolly Boys<sup>(2)</sup> (precursors of today's Hospital Corpsmen). Among these first medical Sailors was Joseph Anderson, a 16-year Loblolly Boy who served aboard the schooner [USS Eagle](#) in 1800.

On July 26, 1943, the first class of African-Americans entered Hospital Corps School in Great Lakes. Among the first corpsmen in 1943 was John Andrew Haskins, Jr., who later earned distinction as the first African-American corpsman awarded for heroism. On Oct. 4, 1944, Haskins was the recipient of the Navy and Marine Corps Medal for heroic conduct following [the explosion of the Naval Magazine, Port Chicago, CA.](#)

In April 1945, Hospital Apprentice 2nd Class Ruth Isaacs, Hospital Apprentice 2nd Class Katherine Horton, and Hospital Apprentice 2nd Class Inez Patterson became the first African-American women to graduate Hospital Corps School, Bethesda, Md.



Hospital Apprentices Second Class Ruth C. Isaacs, Katherine Horton, and Inez Patterson (left to right) were the first black women to enter the Hospital Corps School at National Naval Medical Center, Bethesda, Md. (Courtesy of Navy Department Library)

In October 1951, Hospitalman Josephine Delores Rosa reported aboard USS *Maurice Rose*, becoming the first African-American woman corpsman to serve aboard a ship.

On Nov. 1, 2007, [Master Chief Laura A. Martinez](#) became the first African-American and second woman to serve as Force Master Chief and director of the Hospital Corps.

### **Dental Corps**

On Sept. 23, 1944, Dr. Thomas Watkins, Jr., of Salisbury, N.C., became the first African-American dentist commissioned in the Navy Dental Corps.

On July 1, 1966, Commander Thomas James of Pensacola, Fla., became the first African-American dental officer to retire from the regular Navy. He received his commission on April

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14, 1951, and served most of his career with the Fleet Marine Force.

## **Medical Corps**

Dr. Arthur Lee Thompson of Detroit, MI, was sworn into the Navy July 12, 1944 becoming the first African-American physician in the Navy.

In 1966, LT William Ross of Detroit, MI, became the first African-American submarine doctor. He later became the first African American officer to receive the Golden Dolphin Award (1969).

Paul Stewart Green, of Manson, NC, was the first African-American physician to reach the rank of Captain in the Navy (1968). When selected, he was one of only three African-American captains in the Navy.



Lt. Donna P. Davis, the first African-American woman to be commissioned in the Navy Medical Corps, signs her certificate of appointment at Navy Recruiting District, Jacksonville, Florida. Looking on are Chief Navy Counselor William Brown and Lieutenant Boykin Jordon. (1975) (BUMED Archives)

April 25, 1975, Donna P. Davis, of New York, NY, was commissioned as a lieutenant, becoming the first African-American woman physician in the Navy.

[Rear Adm. James Johnson](#) of Wilmington, NC, was the first African-American Medical Officer of the Marine Corps (1998), commanding officer of NMC San Diego (2001) and lead agent for TRICARE Region Nine (2001).

[Vice Adm. Adam Robinson](#) of Louisville, KY, was the first African American physician to serve as commander, National Naval Medical Center, Bethesda, Md. (July 2004), and commander, Navy Medicine National Capital Area Region (October 2005). In September 2007, he became the first African-American Surgeon General of the Navy and chief, U.S. Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery.

## **Medical Service Corps**

Before the Medical Service Corps was established in 1947, medical administrators, and allied

scientists served in the Navy as Hospital Corps Officers. Among these MSC pioneers was African American scientist James Hope Birnie who served as a Hospital Corps officer in World War II.



Lt. John David Robinson, first African-American clinical psychologist in the Navy. (October 1975) (BUMED Archives)

In October 1975, Lt. John David Robinson, Houston, Texas, became the first African-American clinical psychologist in the Navy.

Lt. Doris Forte entered the Navy on April 1, 1976, earning distinction as the first African-American optometrist.

In January 1980, David Lawrence Kennedy was commissioned as the Navy's first African-American uniformed social worker. Kennedy retired as a Captain in 2004.

### **Nurse Corps**

During the Civil War, African Americans comprised 25 percent of the total naval force; not included in this statistic are five African-American women (Alice Kennedy, Sarah Kinno, Ellen Campbell, Betsy Young, and Dennis[e] Downs) who served as nurses aboard the Navy's

“first” hospital ship, [USS Red Rover](#) in 1863.

Phyllis Mae Daley of New York, NY, was sworn into the Navy Reserve on March 8, 1945 earning the distinction as the first African-American navy nurse. A month later, Nurse Edith Mazie Devoe was commissioned in the Navy Reserve on April 18, 1945. Devoe later become the first black nurse in the Regular Navy when sworn in on Jan. 6, 1948.

Oct. 23, 1968, Hazel Pauline McCree became the first African-American Nurse selected for full Commander.

In September 1978, Joan Bynum became the first African-American captain the Nurse Corps and first female black officer to attain rank of Captain.

Although the list is not as comprehensive as we would like, we ask our readers to please contact us at [andre.sobocinski@med.navy.mil](mailto:andre.sobocinski@med.navy.mil) if you have any additional names that we can add to this list.

### **Footnotes**

1. Ironically, as the U.S. Navy steamed from the age of sail and into the early twentieth century, many of its policies on servicemembers became less progressive. During the Woodrow Wilson Administration, the “Jim Crow” state laws of the south became, in part, the policy of the U.S. Navy. During the 1920s, the Navy instituted the segregation in its service; and from 1922 to 1942, it barred blacks from serving as anything but mess attendants or stewards. By order of President Franklin Roosevelt, four months after the Pearl Harbor attack, the Navy's discriminatory policies were chipped away at. On 7 April 1942, Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox announced that the Navy would start accepting enlistment of blacks in ratings other than messmen. By 1943, African Americans were finally allowed to serve as hospital corpsmen; and by 1944 blacks—following the lead of the [“Golden Thirteen”](#) —were

allowed to serve as dentists, nurses, physicians, as well as Hospital Corps officers.

Segregation in all military services was finally eradicated by [Executive Order 9981](#) on July 26, 1948.

2. So named after the thick porridge or “loblolly” they rationed out to the sick

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