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Thomas P. Honsa



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Doing the Job: The 1964 Desegregation of the Florida Army National Guard

by Thomas P. Honsa

The American civil rights movement usually brings to mind cities such as Montgomery, Birmingham, Memphis and Washington, D.C. In Florida, however, one of the most significant events of the civil rights era occurred without fanfare in the small, west coast town of Palmetto. It was here in 1964 that the color barrier was broken in one of the state's largest whites-only organizations, The Florida Army National Guard. For the first time in post-colonial history, African-Americans were enlisted into the state's military. Prior to American control, African Americans did play a military role in Florida. State guard officials claim that the first black militia unit in North America was formed under Spanish rule in 1683. The company of "free men of color" was commanded by a free black, Francisco Menendez until at least 1742. Free black Floridians also served the British during the American War for Independence and Spain again during the Second Period of Spanish Occupation. Historian Robert Hawk notes that while black units enrolled in the state militia from 1865 to 1901, "they received no state support and no encouragement to become active units."¹

By the start of the 20th century officials across America were revisiting the role of civilian militias in America. In 1903 Congress

Thomas P. Honsa is a history teacher at Manatee County's Lakewood Ranch High School and is an adjunct professor of history at Manatee Community College and in the Eckerd College Program for Experienced Learners.

1. Robert Hawk, *Florida's Black Militia*, <<http://www.floridaguard.army.mil/history/read.asp?did=1293>> (12 June 2007).

enacted legislation authorizing the replacement of militias with National Guard units, and Florida was the first state to implement the new law.² In *Standing at Armageddon*, Nell Painter observed that these new guard units gave middle and upper class men, products of the 19th century industrial revolution, the opportunity to become local military officers, dominate domestic security and quell labor unrest.³ Florida's commitment to segregation meant that the new guard leaders were always white; it is hardly surprising that more than 60 years would pass before the Florida guard enlisted African Americans.

By the mid-1960s segregation in the National Guard was an issue gaining national significance. President Harry Truman ordered the desegregation of the active armed forces in 1948, but the policy did not apply to individual state guard units, which established and enforced their own enlistment and personnel policies. In fact, the General Staff's Committee on National Guard Policy specifically recommended against forced desegregation of the Guard, noting the tradition of local control and custom over state units.⁴ New Jersey became the first state to desegregate its National Guard in 1947,⁵ but most southern states refused. Civil Rights advocates quickly recognized the injustice in the policy. Director of the Washington Bureau of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Clarence Mitchell referred to segregated guard units as a "problem" as early as 1954.⁶

In 1962, Isham G. Newton conducted an extensive study of Guard recruitment practices. He situated the National Guard in its constitutional and historic context, noting the racially neutral language of the constitutional provision that created militias and the service of African Americans in all wars. In his discussion on the dual nature of the guard, he argued that the larger federal funding (95% by 1960) should provide the basis for extending mil-

2. Robert Hawk, *Florida's Army: Militia, State Troops, National Guard, 1565-1985* (Englewood, Fla: Pineapple Press, 1986), 126.

3. Nell Painter, *Standing at Armageddon: United States, 1877-1919* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987), 22.

4. Morris J. MacGregor, Jr., *Integration of the Armed Forces 1940-1965*, <<http://www.history.army.mil/books/ingetration/IAF-FM.htm>> (18 January 2008), Chapter 3, p. 3

5. GlobalSecurity. Org, <<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/agency/army/armg-history.htm>> (17 January 2008).

6. Clarence Mitchell, "The Status of Racial Integration in the Armed Services," *The Journal of Negro Education*, Volume 23, No. 3 (Summer, 1954), 211.

itary integration to state units. To demonstrate the persistence of segregation in the National Guard, he mailed questionnaires to the Adjutants-General of the 50 state and District of Columbia Guard units. Sixteen states, eleven in the south, did not return the questionnaire. All except Texas, however, informally responded they had no "negroes in the State National Guard."⁷ Newton attributed this to "the existence of unwritten racially restrictive policies related to recruitment and acceptance of minority group applicants."⁸

Richard J. Stillman concurred in *Integration of the Negro in the U.S. Armed Forces*. He reports that by 1965 only 539 of 122,669 of America's Guardsmen were non-white.⁹ Stillman acknowledged that southern racial attitudes were a factor behind the figures, but pointed out additional subtleties in the issue. He attributed some racial disparities to population distributions. In one example, he noted that segregated housing policies helped state Guard leaders exclude African Americans from essentially local armories. In places like Idaho, segregation in Guard units reflected the miniscule black population in the state, whereas units like "Harlem's 369th Regiment is all-black because Negroes live there, have traditionally formed this historic regiment, and take pride in keeping it that way." He argued that southern efforts to recruit African Americans into the Guard were complicated by the non-violent nature of the civil rights movement there. "The political goals of Negroes in many areas place little emphasis on military demands," he wrote.¹⁰ Moreover, his survey found that African-Americans interested in opportunities offered by the service were more inclined to join the regular military.¹¹

By 1961, Civil Rights groups were exerting pressure on President John F. Kennedy to address the issue, and the NAACP called on federal authorities to withhold funds from states with white-only guards.¹² As Morris MacGregor noted in *Integration of*

7. Isham Newton, "The Negro and the National Guard," *Phylon*, (1st Qtr, 1962), 26.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

9. Richard J. Stillman, *Integration of the Negro in the U.S. Armed Forces* (New York: Frederick Praeger, 1968), 98.

10. *Ibid.*, 105.

11. *Ibid.*, 106.

12. MacGregor, chapter 20, p. 9.

the Armed Forces 1940-1965, state officials rejected the demand in language that emphasized the independence of state units from federal authority: “the Adjutant General of Florida declared that since the guard was a volunteer organization and his state had always drawn its members from among white citizens, Florida was under no obligation to enlist black men.”¹³ On June 24, 1962, however, Kennedy announced the formation of the President’s Committee on Equality of Opportunity in the Armed Forces, headed by prominent Washington attorney Gerhard Gesell.¹⁴ Included on the committee were men such as Whitney Young, Abe Fortas and Benjamin Muse, all with a background in both law and civil rights.¹⁵

By the time the committee released its final report in November of 1964, Lyndon Johnson was President. Over political objections from such prominent officials as Attorney-General Robert Kennedy, the report urged the President to declare the desegregation of the National Guard in the best interest of the country. MacGregor cited the committee’s belief that desegregation was imperative because guard membership offered “a distinct advantage for some individuals, providing the chance to perform their military obligation without a lengthy time away from home or work.” By the time the report was issued, though, most southern states, including Florida, had enlisted African Americans into their guard units.¹⁶

There is little documentary information on specific enlistment policies for the Florida Guard; there are no records on desegregation in the headquarters archives in St. Augustine.¹⁷ National Guard historian John Listman noted that before leaving office in 1968, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara raised the subject of desegregation with state guard commanders, but there are no written desegregation directives for Florida or any other state in the National Guard archives.¹⁸ Historian Renee Hylton points out that the lack of federal records is not surprising, since the state unit was

13. Ibid.

14. Bruce Lambert, “Judge Gerhard Gesell Dies at 82; Oversaw Big Cases,” *New York Times*, <<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9F0CE1DF163DF932A15751C0A965958260>> (19 January 2008).

15. MacGregor, Chapter 21, p. 15.

16. Ibid.

17. Col. Greg Moore, Interview with author, 5 July 2007.

18. John Listman, email message to author, 27 June 2007.

not mobilized to fight in Vietnam, and the governor remained in command of the guard during the period under question.¹⁹ A Department of Defense memorandum based on “word of mouth” suggests that a lone African American joined the Florida guard in 1963.²⁰ There is, however, no written or even anecdotal evidence in St. Augustine identifying this person. Additionally, Florida’s ambiguous racial classification at the time makes it difficult to determine who qualified as African American. One could be considered a “full negro” if his or her great grandmother was black.²¹ Vague classifications raise the possibility that state officials simply told federal authorities what they wanted to hear, knowing their reports were impossible to challenge.

The story of the men who desegregated Florida’s National Guard therefore remains primarily an oral tradition and Palmetto is the first recognized desegregated National Guard unit in Florida. The story of the unit reveals much about the character of west central Florida at the time and says a great deal about the men, both black and white, who served in the guard. Additionally, the account of how and why the men desegregated the guard challenges the popular misconception that the struggle for black equality in America was a series of well-publicized, dramatic milestones that paved the way for future generations. The white guardsmen who oversaw the desegregation efforts and the African Americans who integrated the Florida National Guard remembered their experiences in terms of personal decisions, not as historic, pathbreaking efforts. In the eyes of those who crossed the color barrier into the guard, the real work, and the real challenges, started once they enlisted.

Captain Don Flowers, a veteran of nearly 100 World War II combat air missions, commanded what became Florida’s first desegregated unit. In a 1994 interview, he recalled that federal attention to the racial composition of state units such as Florida’s was hardly unexpected, and he asserted his readiness to participate in the process. “I think people in St. Augustine could see the

19. Renee Hylton, email message to author, 27 June 2007.

20. US Department of Defense, *Year End Report on Integration of Negroes in the National Guard* (Washington, DC) 1963.

21. William D. Zabel, “Inter-Racialism and the Law.” In *Interracialism: Black-White Intermarriage in American History*, ed. Werner Sollors (New York, Oxford University Press, 2000), 57.

handwriting on the wall," he remembered. "We all knew this was going to happen anyway. Besides, headquarters was pushing us at the time to build our strength up" to deal with state emergencies.²² The Florida guard had been particularly active since the end of World War II, especially during hurricane seasons. From 1946 to 1965 guard units deployed to deal with twelve hurricanes, including 1960's Donna and 1964's Dora. Additionally, they were called out to cope with three major floods and five tornadoes.²³ The time commitment required for guard service had reduced recruitment as federal regulations required guardsmen to undergo full time basic training and a six- to eight-year service contract.²⁴

Sergeant Johnsie McGuire, also white, was the company's 29-year-old Administrative Supply Technician. He was a full-time employee of the National Guard, and his duties included running the unit Monday to Friday, along with recruiting and enlisting new members. He also felt that the time was right for integration of the unit, and thought sooner was better than later:

There was much discussion about it. It was really a matter of reading the handwriting on the wall. Those of us who were in a position to make a difference as far as the unit was concerned basically had the idea that a job is a job and the law is the law, and this is what's going to happen. Instead of having something shoved down our throats we figured we as a unit would probably be better off taking the initiative.²⁵

Jim Kanzler (white) was B company's First Sergeant, and a Palmetto postal worker. He had also given thought to the possibility of desegregating the guard. "I don't remember any orders ever coming down about it, but some of the sergeants talked about it. The regular army had integrated and we wondered if the guard ever would and how they would do it," he recalled in a 2007 interview.²⁶ On Kanzler's postal staff was J.R. Green, III, a member of the town's all-black Masonic Lodge #487. "We had a fellow [who heard] about these guys who may want to join the National

22. Don Flowers, Interview with author, 14 November 1994.

23. Hawk, 198.

24. *Ibid.*, 195.

25. Johnsie McGuire, Interview with author, 21 November 1994.

26. Jim Kanzler, Interview with author, 3 July 2007.

Guard,” says Kanzler. “Of course, I had no idea at the time they were black,” he adds, somewhat disingenuously.²⁷ Kanzler told Green to have the men contact him. A short time later Kary Green (no relation to J.R.) called Kanzler.

Green was 31 years old at the time and had served two years in the regular army in the early 1950s. He served in both the Eighth Armored and First Infantry Divisions and had been stationed in Germany. After returning to the United States, Green served six years in the reserves. He says he saw the National Guard as a good part-time job:

I had to find some way of sending my kids to college eventually. My wife graduated [from Florida A&M University] and the deal was I kept the kids while she was in school. Well, when she graduated she couldn't find a job. She finally had to take a job with Health and Rehabilitative Services in West Palm Beach. When she finished her probation in six months, she put in for a transfer to Pinellas county and a move back home. She eventually got it, but it took until 1964. In the meantime, this was a way for me to get a little extra income and further my own military career.²⁸

Green felt he would be the kind of candidate Kanzler was looking for to desegregate the guard; “Kanzler was looking for... fair people who knew the system and could handle it.”²⁹

Green contacted friends, alerting them to the opportunity to desegregate the guard and earn some extra money. One of those friends was 35-year-old Govan Kelly. Kelly, who died in 2005, was a long-time resident of Palmetto, a member of Lodge #487, and had also served in the U.S. Army, driving a truck in Korea from 1950 to 1952. He was driving a truck for a local building supply firm in 1964 and remembered Green's call well:

Kary talked me into it. He came to me and said the National Guard was looking for someone to integrate it, and asked if I was interested. I went to school with Kary, and he and I had been good friends for years. I would

27. Jim Kanzler, Interview with author, 14 November 1994.

28. Kary Green, Interview with author, 15 November 1994.

29. Ibid.

probably say I joined because Kary asked me to, and because he was joining. I went in with a group, and that was the only way I would have done it.³⁰

Another of Green's friends was 33-year-old Lonnie Dixon. Dixon was a member of Bradenton's all-Black Masonic Lodge #490. He, too, was a Korean War veteran and had lived most of his life in Manatee County. Like Green, he saw the guard mainly as a way to make a better life for his children. "I really wanted to see what the National Guard was like," he remembers, "I also wanted to put my children through college. For me it was an opportunity."³¹

A fourth African-American who chose to join the group was 27-year-old Azell Johnson. He knew the other men and says he decided the time and opportunity was right for his own reasons:

I never thought of it as being the first, or in the group of the first, blacks in the National Guard. I began to think about it, though as time passed on. . . . Remember this was quite a shock. I don't even think we totally realized it at the time.³²

Herman Randall, another enlistee, agreed. "We weren't what you would call Jackie Robinson types," he says. Randall was a Korean War veteran who had moved to Palmetto after his discharge from the army in order to help run his family's business. The guard was one way he could continue his military experience and still meet his personal obligations. "We were all mature, stable-minded adults and veterans. We'd been through it before. We were well-disciplined."³³ In all, six African-Americans chose to cross the color line and desegregate Florida's National Guard at once. Kary Green, Kelly, Dixon, Randall and Johnson were joined by James Bush, Jr. McGuire enlisted them on November 2, 1964.³⁴

30. Govan Kelly, Interview with author, 27 November 1994.

31. Lonnie Dixon, Interview with author, 20 November 1994.

32. Azell Johnson, Interview with author, 22 November 1994.

33. Herman Randall, interview with the author, 2 July 2007.

34. Bush has since passed away. Most of those directly involved recall an African-American named Martin joined around the same time. It is not clearly remembered whether Martin was his first or last name, but the consensus is he enlisted shortly after the original six.

All knew to expect some level of trouble. Before their enlistment, Kanzler sat down with the men and told them what they already knew, that they could be in for a rough time. Kanzler pointed out that even though all the inductees had experience in the integrated regular army, racial feelings might run stronger in a southern part-time National Guard unit. Interracial military contact was less intense, he says, and deeply held feelings might be reinforced when off-duty:

I laid it on the line when they came to sign up. I said, 'You better understand you're black. You're starting something here. I hope you can take the word nigger and some other things they're going to say.' To the best of my memory only one guy used that word besides me. I used it with some of the white guys for discipline purposes, telling them what not to say.³⁵

The men clearly remember that first meeting with Kanzler and praise him for his candor and forthrightness. Green says he remembers the meeting particularly well:

He discussed the N-word with us. He asked what we thought and could we deal with people using it. I know for myself I didn't promise anything. I wasn't about to go into the situation saying I was going to be somebody's lackey dog. My feeling was this was the federal government. I'd been in the army, and I was going to be treated just like everybody else. . . . This is America, and I felt this was an opportunity to further my military career.³⁶

Kelly also remembered the talk with Kanzler. "He was real good the whole time...He let us know it would be hard on us."³⁷

It was hard, especially at first, and especially for Kelly. While the rest of the new inductees went into mess detail, Kelly took his post as an infantryman. His was the only black face seen in the field, and he was the target of repeated belittlement and snubs. "I didn't want to cook...But a lot of times back then I wish I had," he laughed.³⁸ He remembered most of his early problems occurred in the field:

35. Kanzler, Interview.

36. Green, Interview.

37. Kelly, Interview.

38. Ibid.

My first experience with any problems was when we went into the field for the first time. We were in two-man tents. They lined us up in two lines, facing each other. The man in front of us was the man we were supposed to tent with. The guy I was supposed to be with refused. I just sort of figured 'all right,' and I slept in my one-half of the tent by myself. It kind of surprised me at the time. I thought the first sergeant would have made him do it, but he didn't.³⁹

Kelly recalled another incident that occurred when he was on guard duty a few months later. He went back into his tent around 10:00 p.m., and his tent-mate asked what time it was. When Kelly told him, the man realized he was bunking with a black and within five minutes had left the tent and did not return all night. Kelly said, "the next day it was the two of us together in the field all day, and neither of us said one word to the other. All day we just worked in silence."⁴⁰

Not all of the racial slights directed against Kelly occurred in the field. On a trip home from Camp Blanding the line of trucks they were riding in stopped. The five whites riding with Kelly jumped off the back of the truck and ran to one further up the line. Kelly spent the rest of the ride home by himself. "I used to wonder why they just didn't tell me what they were thinking or what they were feeling," he recalled. "To tell you the truth, my feelings were sort of hurt."⁴¹

Despite all the unspoken insults, Kelly stated he encountered only one physical altercation in his six years in the guard. Two brothers confronted and insulted him in the field. He refused to back down. They stood there staring and cursing at one another until tempers finally cooled, and the incident subsided:

I was under a lot of pressure, myself. I used to have headaches every day. There were a lot of little things that you try to envision beforehand. You can't know every one, though. Like when I finally found a white man who would share the same tent with me, he kept his rifle between me and him the whole night.⁴²

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid.

42. Kelly, Interview.

Green also experienced difficulties after joining the guard. He says, though, that it was not the blacks who had the problems; it was the whites. The age and veteran status of the new men helped them deal with the slights, even when some whites left the guard because of the presence of blacks. The support of the company leadership proved critical, and Green remembers that "Sergeant Kanzler backed us up all the way."⁴³

Green asserts, however, that the men of B Company were not as much a problem as guardsmen from other units, especially those from Ft. Myers and Arcadia. "They always had a little smile or smirk when they were around," he remembers. "As long as they were smiling it was okay. It was when they got drunk . . . then it got bad. But our unit closed ranks."⁴⁴ An incident Green remembers clearly involved guardsmen from outside the local unit:

I remember there were two of us they sent up to Camp Blanding for school. It was me and another guy, a white fellow. We went up there, and they had to provide sleeping quarters. Well, I was the only black in a room full of whites. Me and the other fellow I went up with bunked right next to one another. The other ones, though, there were always five or six empty bunks between us and them. They slept in the same room but wouldn't sleep in the same area as me.⁴⁵

Like Kelly, Green says physical threats were practically nonexistent. He attributes that to not only his regular army experience, but also his rank. He entered the guard as a corporal and made sergeant within his first year.

That rank led to some problems for Green. Kanzler remembers one incident in which a white man refused to work under the black company mess steward:

There was this one guy assigned to KP. He walked off duty and said, 'I'm not working for any nigger.' He got about halfway across the drill floor when I caught him, turned him around and said, 'How about you go and apologize to Sgt. Green?'⁴⁶

43. Green, Interview.

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.

46. Kanzler, Interview.

Randal, who retired from the guard in 1987 as a staff sergeant, says he also encountered problems as he gained more responsibility. Some of his men, he feels, had probably never spent an extended amount of time with African-Americans.

They just knew what their families had told them. They found out the hard way that people of color aren't dumb and all the other things they'd heard. We weren't out to rape their women and all that. They came to question all the things they'd been taught and that had to be hard, it had to be kind of confusing.⁴⁷

Randall remembers calling his detail together once and telling them he could not treat them all the same. "You should have seen their eyes pop. But then I said, 'I can treat you all fairly.' From that time on those guys really put out for me."⁴⁸

Johnson, meanwhile, says the reaction he received upon entering the guard was almost uniformly positive. He entered with the attitude he would try one six-year enlistment term and see how it went and calls his reception into B company warm and friendly. Most of his military experience had been as the assistant chief of admission and disposition at the army hospital on Okinawa. He dealt primarily with officers and had a very positive view of military life in general. He says that attitude made all the difference in the guard:

We had that military background and that was important. We knew how to wear the uniform and of course, we had some extra patches [from regular army service] on our sleeves and people would come up and say, 'What's that patch for?' and 'Where did you get that one?' You combine that with the fact we were a little bit older and a lot of the young white soldiers just didn't have the impetus to come up and start trouble.⁴⁹

Johnson says Bush was particularly noteworthy for the care he took toward his uniform. Bush's uniforms, he says, were tailored and meticulously measured, even to determining exactly how much of pant leg to stuff into his boots.⁵⁰

47. Randall Interview

48. Ibid.

49. Johnson Interview

50. Ibid.

The newly enlisted blacks were not the only ones to suffer from adversity after desegregating the guard. The three white men most responsible for bringing them in, Flowers, McGuire and Kanzler, had to face negative situations as well. The difficult task of making desegregation as smooth as possible for the whites in the outfit fell to Kanzler. He recalls that there was a lot of discussion among the men about the newcomers, but there was never any physical violence. He points out, however, that their inclusion was hardly smooth. "Some of the platoon sergeants and squad leaders said they didn't want them," said Kanzler. "They had to let them in. I was the First Sergeant. I had power. And at that time I was seen as someone who could be rather mean when I had to be."⁵¹ Kanzler also recalls verbal abuse he received from other whites in the National Guard who discovered he had helped enlist the blacks:

There were never any threats or anything in writing. I remember being told by some people 'You can be busted' or 'You can be discharged.' But that was really individuals, nothing official. And I was never really afraid. I knew where a lot of skeletons were buried. After 16 years you know who drinks what kind of whiskey and what people do at camp.⁵²

Flowers also recalls receiving an unofficial reprimand after the blacks enlisted. One colonel called Flowers and gave him trouble. "He said 'My God, Flowers. What are you doing enlisting six at one time?'" Flowers laughs. "Who knows, maybe my doing this was the reason I retired as just a major."⁵³

To a man, the first blacks in the Florida National Guard say the adjustment period after they enlisted was difficult but not dangerous. To them, breaking the color line was just a beginning. The true advance in civil rights and black opportunity could come about only if they were able to succeed in the guard. Success to them meant a long-term commitment and professional advancement. Moving up through the ranks and perhaps even eventual retirement were their true goals when they joined. They realized the only way they could do this was to maintain the highest possible standards of professionalism and performance. This, they say, was their real contribution to the civil rights movement.

51. Kanzler, Interview.

52. Ibid.

53. Flowers, Interview.

"It was our game-plan," says Johnson. "We chose not to let anything stop us." According to Johnson and others, the men discussed their role in the guard and what desegregation meant to them. They reached a consensus, he says, that they needed to earn respect and recognition in the guard. The way to do that was to become active, productive and integral parts of the unit. "We had the mindset that we weren't going to let somebody's attitude be a block or hindrance to our advancement," he says. "The army says, if you equip yourself, you'll move. That's what we were trying to do."⁵⁴

Dixon echoes those sentiments. He says that even though their enlistment did not generate a public negative reaction, they still were not sure how far they could move up in the guard. They were, however, determined to find out. He says the only way to do that was to do the job the guard asked him to do:

There really hadn't been a big blow-up over what we did, but I'm sure it had to be easier for the people who came after us to join the guard. After a period of time people see you're in there to do a job, and you do it. That builds respect in people. Eventually people became real receptive, and some of those who had doubts finally accepted us. They realized we had a role to play in the guard. We did our jobs and, I think, served as a model.⁵⁵

Dixon points out that over time, it became increasingly easier to be black in the Florida National Guard, and time was an important consideration in his mind. The enlistees' commitment to the guard let people know they were not in just to change the guard but to contribute to it. "It wouldn't have worked," he says, "if we'd stayed just two weeks."⁵⁶

The first inductee to advance significantly was Green. By the summer of 1965, he was a sergeant and B Company's mess steward. The promotion put him in charge of the unit's food and its preparation and gave him command over the kitchen staff. The kitchen staff was made up of both blacks and whites. While there were problems, Green says, he always felt equipped to deal with them. "I think my experience and my leadership really helped me," says Green. "I had been with the Big Red One [the famous U.S. Army

54. Johnson, Interview.

55. Dixon, Interview.

56. Ibid.

1st Infantry Division] in Germany, and I was proud to be a part of that unit. . . nobody cared about color there.”⁵⁷ His regular army experience, taught him the kinds of threats, such as the traditional peeling of potatoes, a mess steward could use to work his will on a kitchen staff. That, plus his sergeant’s stripes and the backing of Flowers and Kanzler, gave Green real authority over the men of the mess detail.⁵⁸

Kelly’s experience with promotion did not go as smoothly as Green’s. He claimed that at one point during his six years in the guard, he was promoted to squad leader, but his tenure at that position may have been artificially shortened. The reason, he felt, was that the squad’s whites repeatedly questioned having to serve under black leadership. “I knew there would be groups of people talking about me over here when I was standing over there.”⁵⁹ There were several times Kelly thought of joining the other blacks in the mess detail, and he said the black inductees discussed the matter. “There were a few times I almost went into cooking,” Kelly said. “I used to go to Kary and he would say ‘Hang on. You know why we’re doing this.’”⁶⁰

The most dramatic story of advancement in the guard is Johnson’s, the Florida Army National Guard’s first black officer. He says his efforts began on a Saturday morning in 1965 as he was sweeping the hall outside Kanzler’s office in the Palmetto National Guard Armory. The first sergeant was inside talking to several white men about their qualifications for the Officers Candidate School (OCS) the state guard ran at the time. “Well, I wanted to be an officer even then,” says Johnson. “Most of my duty overseas had been dealing with officers, and I knew they got the gray in the military.”⁶¹ Eventually the other men left Kanzler’s office, and Johnson took the opportunity to make his feelings known. According to Johnson, Kanzler initially dismissed the possibility. “He looked at me and said, ‘You can’t do that. It just isn’t done.’ I don’t think he took me seriously.”⁶²

57. Green, Interview.

58. Ibid.

59. Kelly, Interview.

60. Ibid.

61. Johnson, Interview.

62. Ibid.

Kanzler admits his surprise. "There's no question I was taken aback," he says. "He most definitely was the first black to ask, and he wasn't really what we considered officer candidate material at the time." Kanzler points out that, in 1964, the Florida National Guard generally considered officer candidates to be white sergeants with some college education. "We realized, though, we had no right to say who could and couldn't apply."⁶³

Johnson persisted in his efforts to get into the school, however, and contacted McGuire, who told him to come back during the week. They filled out the required applications in McGuire's office and sent them to battalion headquarters where they were rejected. "I think it had something to do with incomplete information on one of the forms," says Johnson.⁶⁴ They corrected the forms and filed again, and the application was then rejected by Florida National Guard headquarters. Again they submitted the applications, which were approved by battalion and state officials, and finally by the National Guard Bureau in Washington, D.C. The entire procedure took about six months. "It was a runaround, sure," says Johnson.⁶⁵

Before going to OCS, Johnson says he had to appear before an officers' review board at battalion headquarters in St. Petersburg:

The looked at my record in the regular army and my good conduct medal and overseas duty and National Guard service and all like that. I don't know whether they were trying to discourage me or feel me out or what, but they told me 'No black has ever done this before, and you should be ready for all the problems you'll encounter.' But the more they came on like that the more determined I was to do it.⁶⁶

Johnson says he reported to OCS at Camp Blanding in north Florida in 1966, and says it was a day he will always remember. He was the only black in a group of around 125 guardsmen who reported for school. From the beginning there were some officers at the school who wanted him out. "I remember one of them said at 0630 the next day he wanted me to have 'all my shit packed and

63. Jim Kanzler, Interview with author, 1 December 1994.

64. Johnson, Interview.

65. Ibid.

66. Ibid.

be at the front gate ready to go.' I told him 'I'll be here when you leave.' That's the only problem I had with him."⁶⁷ Johnson says he was determined not to let anything get in the way of his becoming a National Guard officer. "It was kind of tough at times, but I knew I couldn't let it become a decision-making factor for me," he states. "I had a mission, a purpose. There was nothing they could do to run me out of there."⁶⁸ Johnson graduated from OCS in June of 1966. By this time his unit had become an artillery outfit, and 2nd Lieutenant Azell Johnson was assigned to command Bradenton's service battery of the 116th Field Artillery. He was the first black unit commander in Florida National Guard history. "There were a few who had difficulties taking orders from a black man," he remembers, "but they were the ones with the problem. I had the bars right here [pointing to his shoulder]. It didn't bother me."⁶⁹

How did the local community react to the desegregation of the state National Guard? Then, as today, there seems to have been little publicity over the matter. Johnson says the men involved never made an issue of it, and many in the black community were unaware it had happened. "Our black friends used to ask us why we did it," he says, "but every now and then someone would come over and say 'Hey, how's it going?' and 'You're doing great.' There was a lot of pride."⁷⁰

McGuire also remembers the community reaction as understated and subdued:

It surprised a lot of people in the community that it went as well as it did. You enlist six black men into the Florida National Guard, and they are the first. I think a lot of people were very surprised the unit got on as well as it did without serious incident. I remember Gordon Alderman was the mayor of Palmetto at the time. His family lived here forever. He expressed many times to me how commendable it was how well we got along with each other.⁷¹

McGuire also remembers a lot of surprise that Palmetto was home of the first Florida guard unit to desegregate. He also notes that people's disbelief eventually turned into grudging admiration over

67. Ibid.

68. Ibid.

69. Ibid.

70. Johnson, Interview.

71. McGuire, Interview.

their courage to be the first. "As far as a lot of 'Oh no, you've really gone and stepped in it now,' I don't remember a lot of that. But of course I wasn't listening for it."⁷²

Dixon had become a guard recruiter by 1968, and he remembers the reaction of other communities to their enlistment. At this time, many National Guard units were trying to integrate, and Dixon says those in Miami and West Palm Beach were having a particularly tough time enlisting black members. "I don't think there was anything special about us," he says. "We just went in with a job to do, and we decided to stay in and do it."⁷³

That statement is indicative of the men who desegregated the Florida National Guard. They felt then, and feel now, that succeeding in the guard was the path to inter-racial success. Just being guardsmen was not enough; they had to excel in the guard. That success, however, was very personal at the time. They did not feel an overwhelming sense of mission or that they were making bold steps in the civil rights movement. They saw themselves as six men who joined the National Guard because it made professional and personal sense at the time. They were, of course, aware of their color and that they were the only blacks in the guard. That was not, however, their main concern. Green sums up the feelings of most in the group when he says, "We didn't really think about integration or civil rights at the time. We just felt we were entitled to the same rights and privileges as anyone else in America."⁷⁴

"Absolutely," echoes Randall. "My attitude was if you won't let me in the front door than damn it, I'll go around the back. And once I get a foot in that door you won't ever close it."⁷⁵

With the passage of time all those involved have developed an appreciation for what they accomplished. Thirty years after the fact, the men now talk freely about the legacy of what they did. They contemplate its meaning and its place in the civil rights movement. In 1964, they did what they thought was right for them at the time. Today, they see what they did as being right for the country, and for the generation of black Americans who have followed them.

72. Ibid.

73. Dixon, Interview.

74. Green, Interview.

75. Randall, Interview.

Green has given it some thought. "We opened the way for a lot of young black men in Florida," he states. "It was a chance for us to show the people of Florida that we belong and that we can do the job as well as anybody."⁷⁶

Kelly had a similar view. The guard provided a financial opportunity for him in 1964, and he was happy to take it. He realized at the time they were breaking a color line, but they had no sense of history. "We made history," he recalled, "but the truth is we never really thought about it."⁷⁷

Johnson agrees. While he admits they knew they were desegregating the Florida National Guard and that their presence could change the guard for all time, their priority was doing a good job and gaining acceptance from their white guard comrades. If they failed, it could actually be more difficult for blacks to join in the future. That is why, he says, their role in the civil rights movement was rarely at the front of their minds:

It was never my intention to make a big deal out of it. Now, 30 years later, I do take pride in saying I was the first black Officers Candidate School graduate and the first black unit commander, along with being one of a group of the first blacks in the guard.⁷⁸

The incident has also left a lasting impression on McGuire. The white, full-time sergeant says the enlistment of Bush, Dixon, Green, Kelly, Randall and Johnson was good for the guard. He also says that while it was an historic event, it meant more to him personally. "It will always be significant that six friends were enlisted and the fact that they were black and also the fact they have become some of the best friends you could have in the world."⁷⁹ He also says the personality of the inductees made a major difference in their success in the guard:

If there had been belligerency on our part or on the part of the six guys of the different race, it could have been much different. By the grace of God we were able to find guys we knew, and folks we knew were real people. These

76. Green, Interview.

77. Kelly, Interview.

78. Johnson, Interview.

79. McGuire, Interview.

were men who were interested in trying to make things work and to show their professionalism.⁸⁰

While B Company's white officers and non-commissioned officers invited and supported the efforts at integration, they are quick to quell any suggestion that they deserve most of the credit. "Absolutely not," says Kanzler. "We didn't do it for them; I guarantee you that"⁸¹ In fact, he says the guard may have gained as much from the African-American enlistees as they gained from the guard. "If it hadn't taken place the guard would have been worse off. We would have been lost without some of these guys' experiences."⁸² Green takes offense at the idea he and his friends were doing the bidding of white men when they enlisted. "I didn't like being called an 'Uncle Tom' or people saying I was hand-picked to integrate the guard," he bristles. "I know damn well I wasn't. There was simply an opportunity there."⁸³

One can learn much from the integration of Florida's National Guard in 1964. The event says a great deal about the guard and the men who served in it, and it leads one to think about contemporary perceptions of the civil rights movement in general. The incident points out the professionalism on the part of some guard members. They understood the trend toward desegregation and decided on a proactive rather than reactive strategy. Such behavior casts doubt on the image of the stereotypical National Guardsman playing soldier on the weekend, and highlights the motives of government officials who supported the civil rights movement. The whites who accepted the blacks into the Florida National Guard claim to have done so not out of a spirit of racial harmony, but simply out of professionalism. They felt their responsibility was to be as colorblind as possible, not for the good of the country, but for the good of the Guard and their own professional standing.

Far more importantly, however, the incident raises interesting questions about the everyday nature of the civil rights movement. It has been nearly forty years since the death of Dr. Martin Luther King and over fifty since the Montgomery bus boycotts. In that time, many have come to see the civil rights movement as an issue

80. Ibid.

81. Kanzler, Interview, 1994.

82. Kanzler, Interview, 2007.

83. Green, Interview.

dominated by larger-than-life characters committed to heroic deeds. Certainly, that is accurate to an extent, but one cannot help but wonder how many of the advances made by black Americans over the past fifty years resemble those made in the Florida National Guard. How many historical accomplishments, one must wonder, can today be credited to people who simply saw an opportunity to do a job and make the lives of their children a little bit better? How often were these opportunities presented by people who felt they were simply doing their jobs? It does not diminish the work of Martin Luther King, Jr., Ralph Abernathy, or Malcolm X to elevate the efforts of James Bush, Lonnie Dixon, Kary Green, Azell Johnson, Herman Randall, and Govan Kelly.

These men, in their way, were also civil rights activists. They would have barely considered it at the time, and perhaps they still would have trouble seeing it that way. They solidified their own financial standing by taking advantage of the opportunity to join the Florida National Guard. They also, however, contributed to the movement by doing what they felt was right. They recognized they were the first blacks to enlist, and that they were opening the door for others to follow. That, however, was secondary to their initial goal. Their aspiration was not to make a noble statement by breaking the color line in Florida's military, but to win over their white guard colleagues with their perseverance, professionalism and pride. Over forty years later, Randall recognizes the historic nature of their enlistment, but he sums up the feelings they all say they felt at the time, "I didn't go in to make waves. I just had a job to do."⁸⁴

84. Randall, Interview.