

The Legacy of Henry O. Flipper in the U.S. Army

Jun 14, 2010

By **Prof. Charles Allen, U.S. Army War College**

This year on May 22, the President of the United States and Commander and Chief of the Armed Forces, Barack Obama, was the graduation speaker for the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York. The birthday of the U.S. Army, June 14, marks the anniversary of another graduation of special note. In 1877, Henry Ossian Flipper became the first African American graduate of West Point. That the United States would elect a black man president 130 years after the first black graduate of West Point would have been beyond the pale for many Americans of that generation and culture.

Henry O. Flipper was born into slavery in 1856 and gained his freedom after our bloody Civil War. In 1873, talented and well educated, Flipper received an appointment to West Point and left Atlanta University. While the U.S. War Department sought to have a cadre of African American officers, the military academy staff and students resisted the introduction of Negroes into the Corps of Cadets.

Flipper was the seventh African American to enter West Point and, as a member of the Class of 1877, was the first to graduate and be commissioned as an Army officer. This was quite an accomplishment since from 1870 to 1898, twelve African Americans entered the Academy and only six stayed longer than one semester. Flipper remarked of his experience, "there was no society for me to enjoy-no friends, male or female, for me to visit...so absolute was my isolation." Flipper would be one of the three black cadets that actually completed the curriculum and graduated in the nineteenth century.

His graduation was marked with curiosity, fanfare, and respect by some for his success as a cadet. That, however, did not readily translate into a successful Army career. One of the original Buffalo Soldiers and assigned to the 10th Regiment U.S. Cavalry, Flipper was eventually charged and faced courts-martial for embezzlement of funds. Though found not guilty of that

charge, he was convicted of conduct unbecoming an officer for filing false official reports and was dishonorably discharged. After the Army, Flipper was a successful civilian engineer who would eventually serve in the Department of Justice and later would be a special assistant to the Secretary of the Interior. In 1976, before the centennial of his graduation from West Point, Flipper's descendants filed for review of the courts-martial decision. The Army Board for the Correction of Military Records recommended setting aside the conviction and, as a result, the Army issued a Certificate of Honorable Discharge, citing the unjust nature of the proceedings and punishment. The story of Henry O. Flipper reached another Commander in Chief and in 1999, President Bill Clinton issued a pardon for him.

What is the legacy of this Georgia-born slave? Some might have expected that his graduation would have led to easier acceptance of African Americans into West Point and into the Army officer's corps. That was not to be. Despite the evidence of heroic actions of African American soldiers on the western frontier and in the Spanish American War, our published U.S. history reflected something to the contrary. A 1925 study conducted by the Army War College offered the following conclusion:

As combat troops under modern war conditions, [negroes] never rose to the standard of white units even when well led by white officers. The negro officers were educationally and in character far inferior to the whites, and troops under negro officers were unfit for battle against an aggressive and active enemy.

It was not until 1936 that the fourth African American cadet graduated from West Point, Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. In 1940, his father, Benjamin O. Davis, Sr. became the first African-American general in the United States military. When World War II started, father and son were the only two African American line officers in the Army. As a cadet, Davis, Jr. faced some of the same hardships as Flipper, subjected to "silencing" and isolation during his four years at the Academy. Graduating 35th out of 278 in the Class of 1936, Davis Jr. would become a member of the fabled all-black Tuskegee Airmen, then the 332nd Fighter Group "Red Tails." Later he would achieve the rank of Brigadier General having commanded several black aviation units in World War II. Another Tuskegee Institute graduate and airman, Daniel "Chappie" James, Jr. would become the first African American four-star general in the

U.S. military.

In 1948, in the aftermath of WWII and perhaps taking note of the performance of African-Americans across the services in that great endeavor, President Harry Truman issued Executive Order 9981 directing the integration of the Armed Forces. Few in the West Point Class of 1951 would have considered that cadet Roscoe Robinson would be the first African American West Point graduate to wear four stars and culminate his Army career as the United States Military Representative to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Robinson's alma mater bestowed honors upon him with the Distinguished Graduate Award in 1993. In 2000, West Point posthumously dedicated one of its lecture halls as the General Roscoe Robinson, Jr. Auditorium.

This is more than just a history lesson, there is a personal connection for me and only a few degrees of separation. As a high school senior in the fall of 1972, I was contacted by a West Point liaison officer who was recruiting young men of color to join the officer ranks of our Army. My fellow military academy cadets included Lloyd Austin (the former Commander, 18th Airborne Corps in Iraq and is now nominated as a four-star commander of U.S. Forces-Iraq)) and my 1978 classmate Tom Bostick (now Lieutenant General and the Army Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel/G-1). During those four years at West Point, I met officers of color of proven ability on the staff and faculty who accomplished great things in their service to the nation.

With the Class of 1978, we were by my rough count among the first 300 black graduates from West Point, following Flipper's accomplishment of one hundred years prior. The West Point Classes of 1979 and 1980 included African American brothers, Leo and Vincent Brooks, who would follow in their father's footsteps and attain the rank of Army Major General. Vincent would become the highest ranking cadet as the First Captain of the United States Corps of Cadets. During my assignment teaching there in the late 1980s, we welcomed the appointment of Brigadier General Fred A. Gordon (Class of 1962) as the first African American commandant of West Point.

When I graduated from the United States Army War College in 2001, a retired non-commissioned officer from my battalion command presented me with a framed print of Henry O. Flipper-that print has been on my living

room wall ever since. I returned to the War College faculty in 2003 and to the right of my office doorway is a display of the achievements of Benjamin O. Davis, Sr. This summer another group of 340 students from the military services, government civilian agencies, and 50 countries will attend the Army War College and I hope each of them will take notice of the Davis print as they walk our hallways.

The legacy of Henry O. Flipper is long and significant. The institution that actively resisted enrollment and development of African American officers now has an award in his name to graduating cadets at the Academy who exhibit "leadership, self-discipline, and perseverance in the face of unusual difficulties." As is often the case in our history, U.S. civilian leadership directs change of the Army. The Army, as an institution, resists change that is perceived to challenge its identity, its culture, and its core mission. The institutional bastions, like West Point, are the holders of traditions and can be the fiercest resisters. Civilian direction and oversight is required to ensure that change (for the right reasons) is not subverted and diverted. This is reaffirmed by the legacy of a talented former slave who was motivated to serve his country. The opportunity provided to Henry O. Flipper for service led to opportunities for countless named and unnamed soldier-leaders.

That's the way it should be in our institutions and our society. We should look for and identify talented people, protect and provide for their personal and professional development, and allow them to reach their full potential as leaders in our nation. This is what will keep America great.

Retired Army Col. Charles D. Allen is the Professor of Cultural Science in the Department of Command, Leadership, and Management at the U.S. Army War College.