

The Only Color that Matters

By Rick Ales 2/13/2016

In light of February being Black History Month, I'd like to tell you a story of how a race riot onboard a US Aircraft Carrier forever changed one confused teen.

In February of 1971 during the tail end of the Vietnam War, I was an altruistic, 18-year-old, former Catholic altar boy from rural Mechanicsville Ohio population 73. I usually just told everyone I was from Geneva Ohio, in wine country about 50 miles east of Cleveland. Growing up, my heroes were Rocky Colivito, Jim Brown, Max Alvis, Mudcat Grant and Big Daddy Wags. Twice a summer, my dad and I cheered for Max Alvis and Mudcat and of course Rocky alongside Black fans at the old Cleveland Municipal Stadium. And even though the nuns at the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary had taught me about George Washington Carver, it wasn't until I transferred to Geneva High School in the middle of my sophomore year, that I actually met all of two real Black people. I had a couple of classes with both of them: Melvin, kind of a geek and really good in math and at chess; and Ned, a four-year, three-sport letterman in football, basketball and track. I was surprised that they somehow seemed like regular guys because that's not what my Grandpa had believed. After all, growing up, the evening news was ablaze with reported race riots in places like Watts and Huff, while Huntly and Brinkley warned us of malcontents like Malcom X and militants Huey Newton and Eldridge Cleaver and there were reports that the ever-scary Black Panther Party was on the prowl. I was confused when I joined the Navy in February 1971.

In October 1972, the aircraft carrier USS Kitty Hawk was bound for the Tonkin Gulf when a race riot involving more than 200 sailors broke out, over – of all things- a grilled-cheese sandwich. Then, new Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Elmo R. Zumwalt Jr., was quick to restate his "New Navy" policy: "Ours must be a Navy family that recognizes no artificial barriers of race, color or religion. There is no black Navy, no white Navy – just one Navy: the United States Navy." These were not just words yelled out over the fleet but rather a tolling of Zummy's altruistic

objective to eliminate racism in the Navy. Zummy swiftly put in strong regulations and created the mandatory race-relations program, Understanding Personal Worth and Racial Dignity, known as UPWARD. UPWARD relied on part-time, volunteer racial awareness facilitators or RAF Teams, made up of a white guy paired with a sailor of another culture to lead a 4-day powerful, often rousing and always poignant seminars to a small, mixed-race group of about 20 of their fellow shipmates.

As a second-class Sonar Technician aboard the USS Robert E Peary summer of 73, my altruistic view aligned with Zummy's altruistic objectives, so I volunteered for Racial Awareness Facilitator Training, at Silver Strand Beach Naval Station, San Diego. I had been partnered with Ulman Tyler, a 40-something, Black, by-the-book, all-USN lifer Senior Chief Storekeeper from cotton country outside Montgomery Alabama.

Over two weeks of 10-hour-a-day, intense emotional training to stories about African Americans like Dorie Miller- a cook who for his heroism at Pearl Harbor, became the first Black to be awarded the Navy Cross; Mathew Henson – who led the Robert E Peary's expedition to the North Pole; and Dr. Charles Drew – whose research into plasma led to the modern blood bank system. We watched movies like Birth of a Nation or a documentary on the atrocity of WW2 Nisei internment camps. Most intense were our breakout exercises like developing the hypothetical "Great Green Society" that spurred heated debate moderated by Marquis of Queensbury rules. Then sitting together, sharing evening chow every night the difference between me and my Latino, Filipino and African American shipmates did seem so huge after by the end of training. I was surprised to learn, belying his gruff exterior, Senior Chief Tyler was a really a soft-spoken, pragmatic man with a warm Southern gentleman's humor. Senior Chief and I became the frigate USS Robert E Peary's RAF team.

Over the next two years Senior Chief and I facilitated more than a dozen stirring UPWARD seminars for around 250 of the Peary crew. Of course, mediation by Marquis of Queensbury. Even more satisfying was outside of the seminars.

Many times, Senior Chief and I hit the beach together for beers, bar fly chasing and maybe some soul food, that's chitlins and collard greens – mm, mm good.... NOT! Senior Chief and I both decided we'd much rather have a Big Mac than chitlins. We both thought Lt Uhura and Raquel were pretty hot. We'd shoot skeet and once we even went fishing – something that didn't include booze, women, or guns. Later in life we exchanged Christmas cards for years. Senior Chief and I had become true shipmates—that's way better than BFFs.

For me, a pasty white kid from Mechanicsville Ohio who had met all of two black men in my whole life prior to joining the Navy, UPWARD really opened my eyes but it was Senior Chief Ulman Tyler, my shipmate, who forever changed my world view by teaching me life's greatest lesson, – the only color that matters is red, because we all bleed red. Thank you, Senior Chief.

