

Alex Albright. *The Forgotten First: B-1 and the Integration of the Modern Navy*. Fountain, NC: R.A. Fountain, Inc., 2013. 194 pp. \$20.00. ISBN 978-0-9842-1022-0.

The history of race relations in the United States is bound up, at least in part, with the history of the military in this country. Because the military is both a closed system and a system bound by rules and obedience to those rules, it can sometimes be used as a laboratory, testing barriers and taboos in a way that society at large—unruly and undisciplined as it is—could never hope to test with any degree of certainty. As such, the various arms of the military have, over the years, sometimes been the avenue by which civilian authorities have sought to reconcile social progress with social order.

Alex Albright has chronicled one such step—in this case, one route to integration, or at least the beginnings of social acceptance of African Americans as equal citizens—in *The Forgotten First: B-1 and the Integration of the Modern Navy*. In it, he chronicles a remarkable group of young musicians, many of them with ties to North Carolina, who played a small but significant part in the opening up of the United States Navy, and by extension the entire United States military, to the idea of African Americans as *ranked servicemen*, rather than just as service personnel such as mess attendants and stevedores.

Albright begins with a capsule history of the presence of African Americans in the military, from the Revolutionary War to the start of World War II. He also provides a detailed and fascinating portrait of the pressures for change brought to bear by respected opinion makers, such as James Shepard, C. C. Spaulding, and Frank Porter Graham, who each sought in varying ways to use the crisis of the war as an avenue for social change.

The bulk of the book however, is about the formation and subsequent history of this particular unit and the men who were part of it. Fashioned from oral histories of surviving band members as well as friends and neighbors who remembered the band and its effect on their lives, along with newspaper accounts, surviving military records, and program notes, Albright builds a picture of the unit and its members. He follows the musicians from recruitment to training in Norfolk and billeting in Chapel Hill, right through to their ultimate—and somewhat unexpected—deployment to Pearl Harbor. The author skillfully pilots the reader through an intimate portrait of the band members as they negotiated their way through the complexities inherent in service to a military that treated them as second class citizens. He also delineates how they calibrated their interactions with the larger community around them, particularly in the South, which was still profoundly segregated and deeply suspicious of authority or dignity being granted to non-whites. Concurrently, Albright also details the musical careers of many of the band members, both during and after the war, and provides an enlivening account of their many concerts and performances.

Illustrated throughout with programs, concert pictures, and—most welcome of all—pictures of each of the band members, this book is highly recommended for collections focused on North Carolina, military history collections, and any collection on the history of race relations and integration.

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